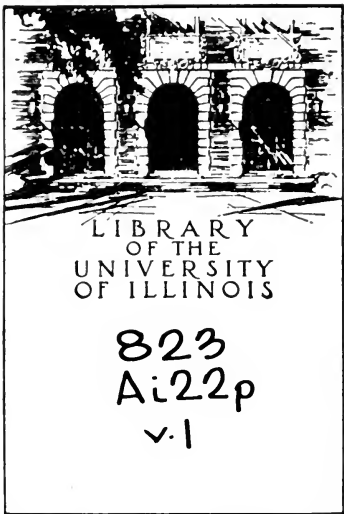


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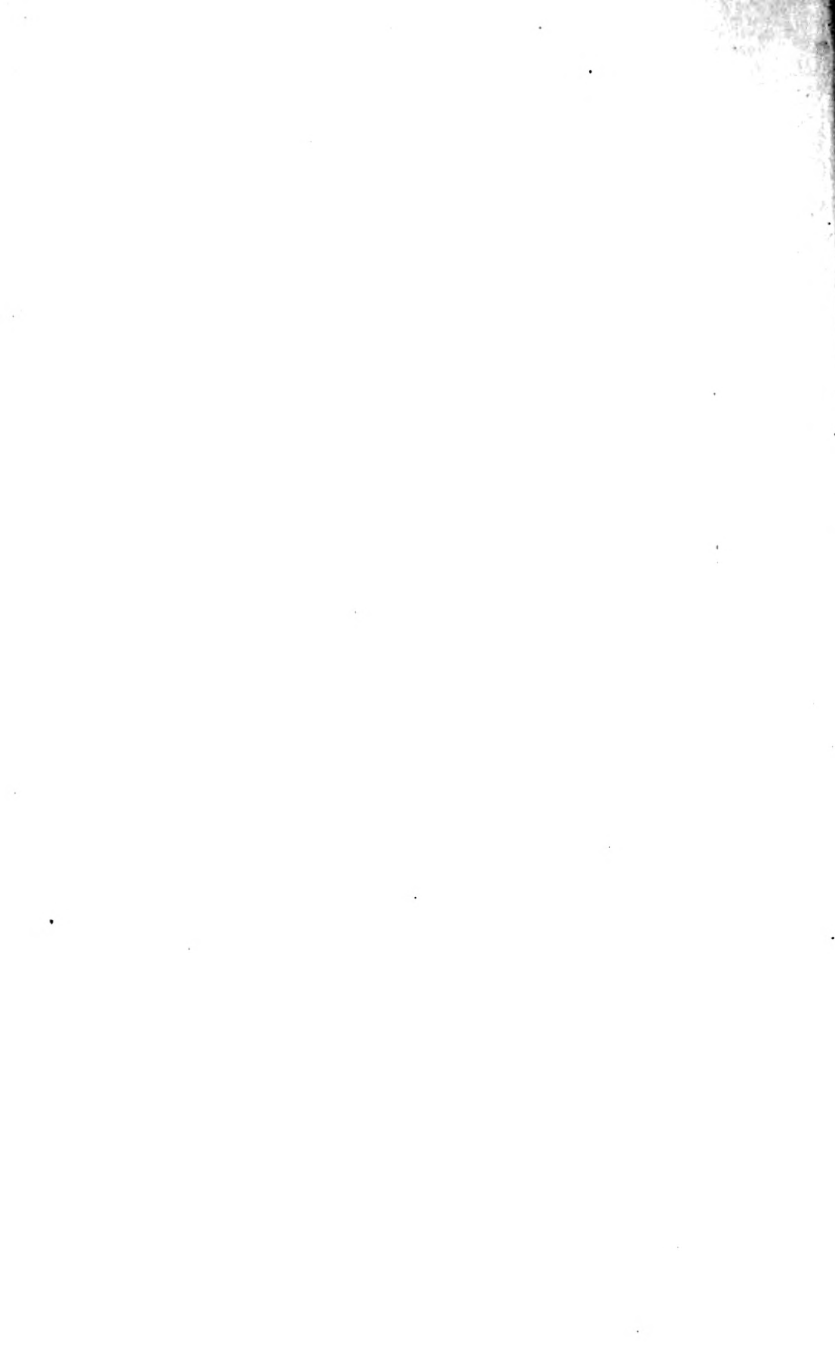
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POET AND PEER.

VOL. I.



POET AND PEER

BY

HAMILTON AÏDÉ

AUTHOR OF

“PENRUDDOCKE,” “RITA,”
&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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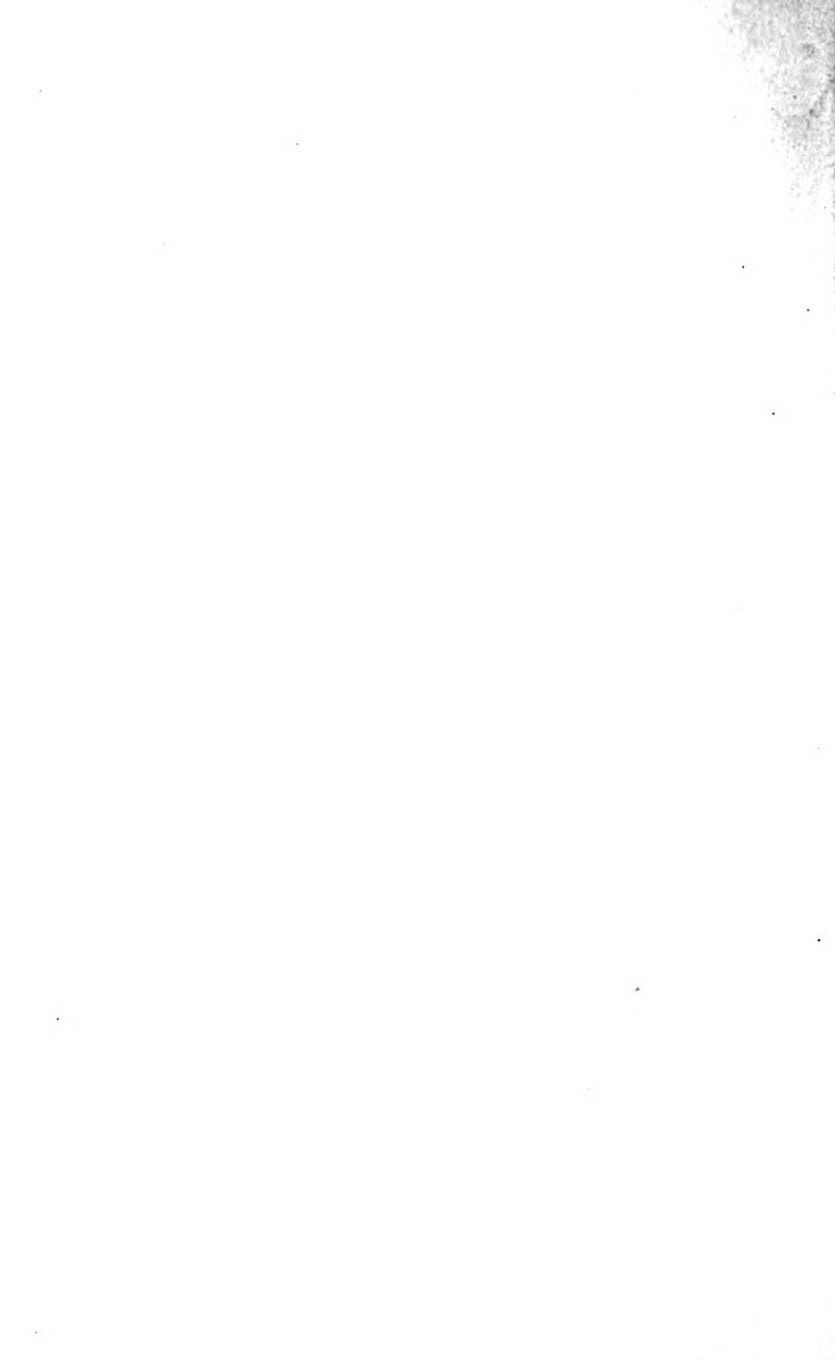
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TO
ROBERT, LORD LYTTON,
THIS RECORD
OF
ANOTHER "POET AND PEER"
IS INSCRIBED
BY HIS OLD FRIEND.

John Peter Rony 1417-1854 Circularity = 3 ✓
P. Lee, Aug 6, 1846



POET AND PEER.

CHAPTER I.

ONE August evening, before the harvest moon had risen over the golden wheat-fields and slopes of orchard land that surround the village of Ripple, a little girl of eleven was seen driving home a cow and her calf from the hill-side pastures where they had been feeding. She was seen, I repeat, and it was by a lad of sixteen, who stood alone, leaning over a gate which divides the Athelstone woods from certain common grounds over which the owner of those woods is also lord of the manor. Ripple be-

longs mainly to him; but it lies three miles away from the Castle, and Lord Athelstone's interests are chiefly with the more populous village of Warley, which nestles at the foot of the Castle steep. There you will find model slated cottages, the national school, and the penny-reading club. At Ripple there is only a dame's school and thatched roofs, and there the sleepy old ways of fifty years since still flourish. The Rippleites lack energy, Lord Athelstone thinks; he regards them with a beneficent toleration, and ministers to their temporal wants, but his heart goes out to the men of Warley, who are more enterprising in their farms, and adopt his lordship's steam ploughs and thrashing machines. Not that he is a man for rash experiment, for innovation and reform: he is a staunch Conservative; but, as such, it becomes him to employ all the means which practical science has applied to husbandry, when their utility is clearly demonstrated. He is a man whose mind is never disturbed by doubts; he sees one thing slowly but clearly at a time; and those who do not see

as he does are either dangerous radicals or pig-headed boors.

All this is but a natural digression from the young lad who leant over a gate that autumn evening some twelve years ago. Wilfred Athelstone, his father's only child, was then an Etonian. He knew but little of Ripple, except as a hamlet in an out-lying corner of his father's estate, while every man's and woman's name in Warley was familiar to him. But the boy was unusually open to impressions of beauty; and the nestling of moss-grown roofs, and diamond-paned casements, the slopes of garden, glowing with rose-cheeked apples, and knots of common flowers, arrested his attention, until it was diverted to the little cow-herd who approached.

The boy was already something of a poet, as we shall see by-and-by; and it came into his head, as he stood there, watching this child and her cow, that it was as perfect an idyl as Theocritus ever sang. She tripped along, with the red sunset behind her, tipping the ends of light brown hair that streamed out from under

the linen bonnet tilted over her pretty face, and glorifying the skirt of her lilac print frock, which the breeze drifted backwards as she danced along. She held a stick—it might almost be termed a wand—in her hand, where-with she made believe to drive the mild-eyed mother and her offspring before her, though, in truth, they showed no reluctance to return for the night to their shed and litter of straw. The child was delicately made, and her unconscious grace, and the sweet clear voice in which she caroled snatches of some old country song, as she advanced, fired the young poet's imagination.

Her way led directly past the gate on which he leant. She stared somewhat affrighted on seeing him, and brought both little hob-nailed boots together with a courtesy which resembled a futile effort at sitting.

“Good evening,” said Wilfred, in a half shame-faced way (had he addressed a duchess, he would have been bold enough, even to defiance). . . . “What is your name, little girl?”

“Nellie Dawson, if you please, sir, . . . my lord,” replied the sweet little voice.

“Oh, you know me? . . . Not that I am ‘my lord,’ Nellie—never call me that. Where do you live? Who is your father?”

“I ain’t got none, sir. Mother and me lives in yon cottage,” and one rosy hand pointed to the first low thatched roof that showed above the apple-boughs.

“Oh! you’re the child of John Dawson, who died two years ago—I remember. . . . What does your mother do?”

“Mother does everything.”

“You ought to go to school, Nellie, instead of minding the cows.”

“I *do* go, only it’s over at four, if you please, sir, so I run up the field to bring the cow home.”

“And you can read and write well?”

“Yes, sir, and ’rithmetic too.”

“That’s right. There’s nothing like knowledge. It makes all men equal.” The child stared at the aphorism, and said nothing. The young gentleman continued, in his gently

dictatorial way, "You must work hard, and then you'll rise. Everyone ought to try to rise, you know." The child had heard her mother talk about the bread "rising." She had also heard a distich about—

"Early to bed and early to rise,
Makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise ;"

but what the young gentleman meant by *her* "trying to rise," she had no sort of idea. He continued, "I shall come and see your mother. I've never been in your cottage in my life. I am so little at home now. How did you know me?"

"I've a-seed you in church, sir."

"You mustn't say, 'I've a-seed.' Say, 'I've seen. . . . By-the-by, can you milk your cow?'"

"Oh! yes, sir, I always does."

"Always *do*, Nellie. Give me some, then, in this leather cup. Milk warm from the cow is a draught fit for the gods."

The child looked puzzled at this last utterance, but she dropped her little courtesy again, as she took the cup from his hand, and ran to the cow, which was nibbling the grass under

an apple-tree a few yards off. Kneeling down, she deftly filled the cup with the frothing liquid; then, holding it between both her rosy hands, with careful footsteps, she brought it to Wilfred, at the gate.

“Just like Hebe,” murmured the boy, as he took the cup. She had no idea what he meant; but felt proud to have rendered this small service to “the young lord,” as she still called him to herself.

“Thank you, Nellie,” said he, drawing a long breath. “One good turn deserves another, you know. I shall bring you a book when I come. And, if you like it, you must learn some of it by heart, and repeat it to me.” Then, with a nod and a smile, he shouldered his fishing-rod, while the little maid “bobbed” once more, and hurried after her kine.

Here was a piece of news to give mother! The young lord had promised to come and see them, and bring her a book. But, oh! what did he mean by saying that fresh milk was “a drink fit for *the gods*”? It sounded like the

Ammonites and wicked idolaters she had read
of in Holy Writ. Perhaps mother would know
what the young lord meant.

CHAPTER II.

A WORD or two more as to Lord Athelstone, personally and mentally.

He was now nearly sixty, but more hale and active than most men of half his age. He was getting bald, and what little hair he had was white; but his eye was keen, his teeth and his digestion sound, and he would walk all day over the stubble, in the September which was at hand, as vigorously as he did twenty years ago. A certain obstinacy—which was the only point of resemblance between father and son—characterized the lower portion of the face. The forehead was high, narrow, and the perceptive organs largely developed. The nose was a good serviceable nose: neither aggressively long, nor meanly diminutive; neither

refined and sensitive, like his son's, nor powerful and truncular, like the late lord's, as it appeared in the effigy of that learned nobleman which hung over the dining-room sideboard.

Lord Athelstone lived in the faith, political and religious, of his fathers, with just so much difference as the change in the times rendered imperative; no more. They had been orthodox, and so was he; but he tolerated a surplice in the pulpit, and admitted with reluctance the possibility of the world not having been created in seven days. They had been good old Tories; he was a Conservative; yet thirty years ago he had been held by some of his party to entertain unsound views; voting for the admission of Jews into Parliament, and standing, so to speak, on a small headland, in advance of the strong cliffs of Toryism. Now the tide was above his ankles; yet still he maintained his footing. He was not a man of parts; he had never distinguished himself at Cambridge, or in the House of Commons, as a young man, or in the other House, of later years; but he had strong common sense, and had done his duty as

a husband, a landlord, and a magistrate, on the whole, wisely. How he would do it, in the yet more difficult part of father which he would be called on to play as his son grew up—a part demanding in this particular case infinite tact and judgment—remained to be seen.

Lady Athelstone was nearly twenty years her husband's junior; but the disparity of age was apparently felt by neither; and as time went on, it brought the middle-aged woman nearer and nearer to her still active and energetic lord. Lady Athelstone was neither active nor energetic by nature; but she was consumed by a desire to be irreproachable in every detail of life, goading her into a fitful but fatiguing earnestness, which at first sight resembled both activity and energy. She sat at the board of Benevolent Ladies' Institutions, and belonged to numberless organizations for well-doing, and deserved infinite credit, inasmuch as it was *not* pleasure to her, but grievous trouble. She read books "for improvement," and hoped her information was exact; if not, she begged you would correct her. Her

position, in the social scale, both as to rank and fortune, was duly weighed, and it influenced the choice of her bonnets. She was, even at forty, still a pretty woman, of the over-refined type which indicates some impoverishment of the firmer and healthier forms of beauty, by a process of natural selection, in civilization.

But the perils of personal vanity she had never known. Even when first married, fifteen years ago, she never seemed to expect admiration, and the suggestion of flirtation in connection with her name had never crossed the brain of the keenest scandal-monger. She was an admirable and a submissive wife on every point unconnected with Wilfred. Upon this subject she ventured occasionally, in a mild, persistent way, to differ from the boy's father, who, as she thought—and perhaps rightly—did not “understand” his son, and rendered scant justice to his abilities. Whether the fond mother “understood” him better is questionable; if “understanding” purports to include the wise regulation of materials not easily reducible to laws. Had she been the

arbiter of his fate in those days, Wilfred would not have gone to a public school, for Lady Athelstone feared the contact of such *pâte tendre* with coarse earthenware. But his father was resolute; stuff and nonsense about a poetic temperament, and high-strung, sensitive organization, &c., &c.; four generations of Athelstones had been educated at Eton; the boy must rough it, as his forefathers had done. And he did.

Wilfred's scholarship, in spite of his reputation in a narrow circle of connections as being "so remarkably gifted," was not very noticeable; but he did fairly well in classics, and won some reputation by his Latin verses. The utterances of his English muse were yet more fluent; and the impassioned rhapsody and revolutionary vaticinations of the aristocratic youth of tender years won for him a certain amount of admiration, not unaccompanied with correlative ridicule. To the latter he was very indifferent; and, as his geniality and good temper prevented his being unpopular even among those who called him "a young ass," it

came to pass, as it always does in the world, that the enthusiast, however small and foolish, had a certain following. To these he held forth; with the others he argued; among both, his love of hearing himself talk had full scope. His mother declared he would be the Demosthenes of the Upper House one day; at which Mr. Punchett, the satirist, was heard to say, "it would be a blessing if he prepared for the part now by keeping his mouth full of pebbles."

Wilfred was rash in opinions, to which he held with tenacity, if they were opposed. The temptation of shocking people a little, and astonishing them a great deal, once yielded to, he found irresistible. His father was a Conservative; therefore, as the lines that divide Whiggery from Conservatism are almost imperceptible in these days, nothing remained to the youth, if he wished to be original, but to declare himself a Red Republican. Had he been brought up at a French Communist school, or a German university, his combativeness would probably have led him to become a

staunch upholder of the divine right of kings. But at Eton his friends were the scions of great houses, whose traditions, no less than their impulses, led them to defend the patrician institutions in which they had been nurtured. These boys fought for their cause with pluck and intelligence; and it required all Wilfred's quickness of memory and swiftness of fence to uphold the extreme views it was his pleasure to adopt. But they liked him; for he would do any fellow's Latin verses for him, bore the most merciless "roasting" with perfect good humour, and was a very fair stroke in the boats.

"Athelstone's an awfully good-natured little chap," said an idle young giant named Bruce to another named St. John, a much older, graver, and cleverer lad, with whom Wilfred especially delighted to argue—"but how he does jaw, by Jove! and what rot he does talk, about doing away with the aristocracy, and all that!"

"He will get into some precious mess by-and-by, if he don't change his tone," replied the other.

“Then he’s such a romantic beggar—likes solitude, and mountains, and all that sort of thing,” continued Bruce,—“at least, he says so, and pretends he should like to be poor, and have to work for his bread. It’s all cheek, I believe. He’s too bumptious.”

“He is a poet; it is part of his stock in trade,” said St. John, with a smile, “and he ‘fancies himself’ rather in the character. That’s all.”

So Wilfred was chaffed; listened to and admired by the few, ridiculed by the many, tolerated by all, and “put down” by no one.

It was the evening of the day on which Wilfred had met Nellie Dawson. The boy was seated between his father and mother at a small round table in the great dining-room, with the portrait of the late lord in a thunder-storm over the sideboard, and the army of maroon leather-seated chairs along the wall; not a cheerful apartment at any time, but forming an especially dreary framework to so small a company; for the four servants who

hovered round the table might have belonged to the land of shadows, so noiseless were their movements over the soft-piled carpet.

It was Saturday, and the Castle had been emptied of its guests that afternoon ; a fresh batch was to arrive on Monday ; the interregnum was agreeable to Lord Athelstone, and doubly so to his wife, who hailed these intervals of rest from the toils of hospitality which she endured, as one of the necessary duties belonging to her station, but never enjoyed. Such brief intervals of unshackled intercourse with his boy Lord Athelstone always achieved two or three times during Wilfred's holidays, in spite of the numerous claims upon his time. The soup was not off the table before Wilfred began.

“Father, you know Mrs. Dawson at Ripple, don't you? She lives in the first thatched cottage on the hill-side, near the wood?”

“Dawson? Oh! The widow of that radical fellow who died two years ago. Yes—a good sort of woman, I believe. Why do you ask?”

“I met a child to-day—such a child!—who gave me a drink of milk, and told me her mother was Mrs. Dawson. She was like a dream of health and innocence.”

“A dream? God bless my soul! I daresay she has the reality. Always high-flown, Will. What do they say at Eton to your ‘dreams’?” As his son did not respond, Lord Athelstone went on—“Do you know anything of this child, my lady? I suppose she goes to the dame’s school?”

“Poor little thing, yes. I wish some better education could be given her. I have not seen her for some time, and meant to make my round of the Ripple cottages next week.”

“If she lives all her life there, the education will do well enough for her,” observed Lord Athelstone, decisively.

“But why *should* she live there all her life?” asked Wilfred, raising his head quickly. “Why shouldn’t she go out into the world, and become a——”

“—A housemaid? The dame’s schooling will do well enough for that.”

“I didn’t mean that—a pupil-teacher, or even something better. Why shouldn’t ‘she rise, father?’”

“Why *should* she? That is the question. Why not let her remain contented in the station in which she was born? This over-education and mania to rise are the curse of the present day.”

“The world doesn’t stand still, father. Things are not as they were fifty years ago; the poor can no longer be treated like swine.”

“I am not aware that my father treated any of those dependent on him like swine,” said Lord Athelstone, drily. “There is enough progress without our helping to push society more rapidly down-hill.”

“*Up* hill, I should say,” returned his argumentative son. “The true wisdom, I fancy, is to educate the people so that they shall learn how to bear with fortitude the accident of poverty.”

Lord Athelstone shook his head.

“Stuff! They get dissatisfied with hard

labour. That is the only result. We shall soon have no servants at all. And, as a matter of fact, when you have lived a little longer, you will find that poverty presses more hardly on people of education than on those who, knowing nothing else, are content to live by the sweat of their brow."

And so the discussion continued for some time, supported with a certain amount of truth on both sides; the complete truth lying between the two, though the vision of each was focussed to too narrow a point to perceive this. Lord Athelstone sometimes lost his temper with the sharp boy's pertinacity; sometimes rode roughshod over the opinions Master Wilfred advanced. Neither course was wise. But have any of us known what it is to be contradicted by a chit of a boy? How much worse must it be when that boy is one's son and heir!

Lady Athelstone smiled on her offspring with a gaze more fond than far-seeing, and examined her nails. She always did so when she was not quite at ease. It was so daring of him to take up the cause of the poor so enthusi-

astically! so refined, so unlike most Eton boys, the interest he evinced in this poor little village child! But she wished he would not argue with his father. She wished they could agree; it would be so much nicer. No doubt Papa was right; but then dear Wilfred's views were so generous, would it not be better not to oppose them? For her part, she disliked all discussion. But she promised Wilfred before he went to bed that night that she would go with him to Mrs. Dawson's on Monday.

CHAPTER III.

SOON after luncheon that day the pony-carriage drew up at the little wicket of Mrs. Dawson's cottage, and Lady Athelstone, followed by Wilfred, walked up the narrow garden-path, fragrant with the odour of sweet-peas and honeysuckle. Mrs. Dawson was washing in the kitchen, while Nellie helped her mother to wring the linen, and hang it on the line, stretched between two apple-trees, just outside the door, which stood open.

Many a lady would have been discomposed at a visit under such circumstances, there being a general sense of steam, and soap-suds, and damp linen in the air. But Mrs. Dawson was a very simple creature, whose mind was cast in

an unvulgar mould, and who, when she had expressed her regret to Lady Athelstone at having to receive her thus, did not distress herself further about it, and talked to her visitor with a calm self-possession in which there was no touch of assumption. She was a pale, thin woman, who had been pretty a very few years back; but hard work and sorrow had aged her before her time. The face was a joyless one; the voice and manner singularly gentle.

She hurriedly wiped her hands, and opened the door of her little parlour, made glad by shells, a basket of bead-work, and a cheap print or two. While Wilfred presented the little maid with a selection of English ballads which he enjoined her to read, and learn some of them by heart, especially "King Cophetua's Daughter," and the child's delighted face vied with the crimson binding of the volume in colour, Lady Athelstone seated herself, and said—

"Your little girl is very much grown, Mrs. Dawson . . . she is getting to be quite useful to you, I see."

“Yes, my lady, she is a good child. I wish she took more to her needle; but she’s well-nigh the top o’ the school, and the dame says there’s ne’er a better girl, so I ought to be satisfied.”

“Doesn’t take to her needle? That’s a pity,” said Lady Athelstone, with the necessity of small minds to fasten on a speck. “What is she to do in her station, if she can’t work?”

“She’ll have to do it by-and-by, my lady, so I’m sorry it don’t come nat’ral to her; but she is very handy in odd jobs, and helps me all she can.”

The child was in the outer kitchen, absorbed in the examination of her book, which the young gentleman beside her expounded, so that neither of them heard the conversation in the parlour.

“That is right. I am glad she promises so well, Mrs. Dawson . . . your only child—so important! We must see what we can do for her, by-and-by—I assure you my son was quite interested about her. He takes so much interest about the—the—our poorer neighbours . . .

What do you mean to do with her when she grows older?"

"I hope," said the widow, looking down, with a tremulous voice, "that we shall not have to separate, my lady. Of course, if it is for her advantage, I shall not stand in the way; but I have nothing else in the world, and I do hold by her, my lady."

"Of course; still, you see, Mrs. Dawson, education is a great thing, and Nellie can't improve herself very much at Ripple. There is that to be thought of, and she is fond of books—evidently fond of books," repeated Lady Athelstone, as she observed through the open door the child's radiant little face bent over her ballads. "She will soon get beyond the dame, and you must then think of what you will do with her. If you have any idea of her entering domestic service——" Lady Athelstone paused a moment, which gave Mrs. Dawson the opportunity, without rude interruption, of saying,

"Her father didn't wish, my lady, that she should be a servant, and as long as her and me can live independent——"

“Ah! I remember Dawson had ideas very well. The only thing is, as the child seems intelligent, it is a pity she should do nothing but help you in the housework, and take care of the cow. However, there is time enough to think over it; and if, by-and-by, you care for her to go to one of the middle-class schools, let me know, and I will see what can be done.”

“Her uncle Joshua wants me to go and live near him at Warmington, my lady, but I can’t bear to think of leaving Ripple.”

“Who is her uncle Joshua? What does he do?”

“He’s Dawson’s only brother, my lady—older, and a deal richer. He’s in the iron trade, and a very good business, and only one son, and he’d help me, I know, if I was near him; but he don’t seem to care to do anything for me here. He’s one of them, my lady, as likes to have it all their own way. He’s a self-made man, and thinks a deal of education, and don’t hold by village schools. But I tell him as I’d rather remain poor in Ripple than be well-to-do

in a black, smoky town like Warmington.”

This was the kind of tentative proposition of sentiments on which Lady Athelstone always shrank from pronouncing. Attachment to home was so nice. That Lord Athelstone's poor tenants should be attached to their homesteads was so especially nice, and their landlord would so approve of it; it was a drag upon the wheel of socialism, he would say. That was one view of the question. The other, and less sentimental one, would be advocated by all the Societies to which she belonged, for the advancement of women and development of skilled labour in the industrial classes. Removal to a stirring intellectual centre, and profiting by any uncle Joshua's beneficial dispositions, was clearly the wise course for a poor widow with an intelligent child.

Lady Athelstone's mind oscillated, as it had an unconquerable habit of doing, on such occasions. It was with difficulty she brought herself to say, because it was absolutely necessary to say something—

“ Well . . . that is very creditable to you,

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Mrs. Dawson. But the matter should be well weighed—well weighed. You must think of your child's future. If her uncle is disposed to befriend her, it would be foolish, perhaps, to thwart him. Still we should be very sorry if you left Ripple. His lordship does not like to see his old tenants leave the place; he likes them to go on from generation to generation—and we would always look after Nellie, you know. Still if it is for her welfare—however, you must do nothing rashly—nothing rashly.”

And with this Lady Athelstone rose. She might be led to pledge herself unconditionally to one side or the other if she talked more. *In medio tutissima*. So she took leave of Mrs. Dawson, promising to call again soon.

“Did you ever see such eyes, mother?” cried Wilfred, as they drove off. “And did you observe all her movements? such natural grace. What would the Duchess of St. Leonards or Lady Shoreham give for any of their daughters to be like her!”

“She certainly has a refined *look*,” replied

Lady Athelstone—"wonderful for a poor child; but her voice——"

"Her voice! Why, it's lovely. Her way of speaking is countrified, of course; but the tone of her voice, why, as an old poet says, it is 'far above singing!'"

"Ah! what it is to have imagination, my dear boy! . . . but do not talk in that way before the Duchess and Lady Shoreham, who are coming here presently. They would not understand it. The world generally would not understand it. I am sure I wish I could do anything for this child," continued Lady Athelstone, with a sigh, which embraced a whole round of regrets, beginning with her own incompetence, and ending with the poverty incident to the present condition of human affairs. "I wonder if she has a vocation?"

"A *what*?"

"I mean any turn for a religious life. I might get her taken into the St. Martha's Sisterhood and educated."

"And make her a nun, or something like it! What an idea, mother! She'd better wash,

and hang out linen all her life, than *that*."

"Perhaps, after all, it is better to let her remain as she is. Your papa would certainly prefer it."

"Prefer it? But he hasn't the ruling of all the children's lives in this parish. If they starve, by-and-by, or go to the bad, does he hold himself responsible? What is the use of his trying to keep people back from the benefits of education? They'll kick—that's all. There may be a Burns, a Hampden, a Giotto among these peasants, for aught we know. Think of that, mother!"

Lady Athelstone did think of it. She was ready to accept anything, even the embryo Giotto in Ripple, from her son; but she held it to be her duty to remonstrate, none the less.

"I daresay, Wilfred . . . it is quite possible. Still I wish you would not contradict your papa on these matters; it annoys him. And, after all, is it worth that?"

"I am very sorry to annoy him, mother. But I can't give up the cause of the people because he dislikes it. I hope, sooner or later, he'll

come round—in fact, I'm sure he must. Liberty of conscience, liberty of action—he'll find out that the true wisdom is to give them their head a little, to prevent their getting the bit between their teeth, as they have done in France."

"Oh! in France it is different. Roman Catholics, you know—the priests."

"We are almost as much priest-ridden here as they are."

"Oh! Wilfred, don't say that. It is shocking—so good as our clergy are!"

"To those who think as they do—church-goers and communicants. Not to the Methodist, nor to the infidel. When a man knows his family will get no coals and blankets at Christmas, unless he pretends to believe all his parson tells him, is that liberty of conscience?"

They turned a sharp corner in the lane, and came face to face with Lord Athelstone, on his cob, just as Wilfred propounded this startling inquiry. Lady Athelstone felt relieved from the necessity of making a reply. This dear boy of hers was getting quite too difficult to

deal with. Such advanced ideas, with that generous nature of his. Alas! there was no knowing where they would stop.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. JOSHUA DAWSON was an individual of some weight in Warmington. There were richer and there were cleverer men; there were none who, from such small beginnings, had risen to be so successful. He had come to Warmington forty-five years ago a penniless boy; he had educated himself; he had striven, without rest or relaxation, to build up his fortunes, and he was now a thriving tradesman. He spoke truly when he said, "I have no one to thank for this but myself, sir." Had his burden been "I owe it all to the first kindness shown me by such a one," his hearers would probably have been less impressed by awe for a self-made success; but there would have been

more sympathy in their regard for their fellow-townsmen. It may be that he cared little for this. His appreciation of his own merits, being unchecked by the doubts and dissatisfaction that are apt to cloud the retrospect of less practical minds, fed upon the solid nutriment which his worldly advancement afforded.

He was a dry, hard-looking man, carrying no superfluous flesh, and of immaculate cleanliness; who still wore a stock, though stocks for the neck were, even then, well-nigh as obsolete a penance as those devised for the other extremity of the human body. He had a sound digestion, an arrogant disposition, and a clear conscience. He attended morning service every Sunday, and never grumbled at the poor rates. He had defrauded no man, had established a Mechanics' Institute, and subscribed a handsome sum to all conspicuous town charities. He had done his duty, in short, by his neighbour, and by himself, and he meant that the world should know it.

He was, even now, committing an act of almost unparalleled magnanimity in bidding

the poor widow of that incorrigible brother of his to come and live in Warmington, and in undertaking to provide for his niece's education. Most men, he liked to believe, in his position, would have sought to ignore this low connection; but not so Joshua Dawson. Warmington should recognize with admiration the full measure of his exemplary conduct; provided his sister-in-law would give up herself and her child, body and soul, to him, to do with as it might seem good in his eyes. He had never helped his brother; no, because that brother had set himself in direct opposition to all Joshua's views and principles of life. Perhaps the secret irritation—we will not call it by so harsh a name as remorse, or regret—caused by this reflection was to be allayed by the ointment of his present magnanimity. Be this as it may, he kept up some communication with the silly, obstinate woman, and from time to time renewed his offer.

I cannot reflect upon what Mrs. Joshua Dawson must have endured in her daily life without according to her a more sincere admira-

tion than I feel for many a canonized saint. She had no great lights, and, like the best men and women, she had some little weaknesses. But she possessed unfailing patience, unfailing affection for him who was, in very truth, her lord and master, unfailing charity and kindness to all whom she could befriend. If she was oppressed at times by a sense of what was due to her as Joshua's wife; if her black silk, which cost six and sixpence a yard, and over which she spread her handkerchief when she sat down before her "chayney" tea-service in the back parlour on Sunday afternoons, caused her a glow of pride; and if at church her thoughts wandered to the reprehensible extravagance of Mrs. Jones's new bonnet, these were but specks of small account upon the disk of this guileless, benevolent nature. You could not look into that round beaming face and doubt it.

The only offspring of this dissimilar pair, Sam, was just nineteen, a youth of colossal proportions, with features cast in the commonest mould, and much blurred in the casting, too. He spoke very little in his father's

presence ; at other times he was loud and contradictory, and his physical strength gave great weight to his arguments among his companions. He had inherited his father's arrogance, but not his father's powers of steady application ; and, with his well-oiled carrotty hair, his hat cocked over one ear, and his bright blue satin tie, he looked as if he were little likely to follow in Joshua's steady footsteps. But he had a kinder nature, for all these foibles, than his father ; his heart was not hard, when one reached it ; only there was so much to be connived at in his appearance and manners that few penetrated the offensive crust. He was not popular among his companions ; indeed, behind his back, he was much ridiculed ; but his muscular power and his self-assertion brought him a certain outward consideration, as it often does in this world. With the girls, opinions were divided concerning him ; but few of those who were unaffected by ulterior considerations regarded Joshua's son and heir with any great favour.

One evening, about a year after Lady Athel-

stone's visit to the widow Dawson, Mr. and Mrs. Joshua were in their parlour, in expectation of some guests by the next train whom Sam had gone to the station to meet, and for whom the "chayney" tea-service was duly laid out. These guests were Nellie and her mother, whose coming had been brought about on this wise. Negotiations, which had been pending many months, had terminated in a compromise. Mrs. Dawson would not give up her home at Ripple; she had never known any other since her marriage, she said, and here she hoped to die. Indeed, if Nellie was to be boarded at the school near Warmington to which her uncle proposed to send her, there was no sufficient reason why her mother should be uprooted; though Uncle Joshua pointed out that, when his niece was "finished," the Ripple cottage would be no fit home for her. But the widow, having brought her mind to consent to parting with Nellie (chiefly in consequence of Wilfred's advice during his last holidays, backed feebly by Lady Athelstone), took her stand there. She would accompany the child to Warmington, and

remain with her brother-in-law a few days. Then she would return to her solitary home; and from this resolve no arguments would move her.

She felt a little bewildered, poor soul, by her journey—the first long railway journey she had ever accomplished; and the enormous young man who flourished his cane so grandly as he handed her out of the third-class carriage, and asked if she wasn't Aunt Su, caused her some discomfort—more so than Master Wilfred had ever done. But by the time that the aunt and cousins had walked down the High Street to Uncle Joshua's, followed by a porter with their wooden box, Mrs. Dawson had become more accustomed to her nephew's swaggering graces, and seeing how kind he was to Nellie, and how, notwithstanding the cane, he insisted on carrying the plaid, and the cotton umbrella, and the jar of clotted cream (brought as a small home-offering to Mrs. Joshua), she said to herself, as she afterwards said to her friends in Ripple, "He is a good-hearted young man, is Sam, only he's so big, and is one o' them as has *ways*—"

and this, like the foot-note to an obscure text, cleared all difficulties away in its comprehensive reach.

Mrs. Joshua met them in the passage, with her moon-like face aglow with geniality.

“Well, I *am* glad to see you here, Mrs. John.”

It was the first time she had ever seen her sister-in-law, which circumstance seemed to demand a certain outward formality of greeting in the good woman's eyes, though the voice and manner were more than cordial.

Uncle Joshua stood on the hearth-rug in the parlour; then, as the door opened, he advanced a few iron paces, and held out his hand.

“Well, here you are at last,” was his greeting—“and you're welcome, Susan. I can say no more. I'm a man of few words. This is your girl, is it? Hm! more like you than John. You were a pretty woman when I saw you last. How many years ago is that? Fourteen. I went over to give John my advice, and he wouldn't take it; you remember? I couldn't do more than I did. I knew he'd live to repent

it. Well, you *are* altered. I should hardly have known you."

"I've had a deal to change me, Joshua," she replied, gently. "You're very little changed. It's nat'ral—you've had all things going smooth with you."

"Things go smooth with them as hold by existing institootions, and work hard, Susan. If John'd have done as I told him, instead of spouting against Church and State in the public, and neglecting his trade, things'd have gone smooth with *him*, too."

Mrs. Dawson flushed, but held her peace. What he said was true; she knew it; but it seemed cruel to bring up poor John's unwisdom just now.

Mrs. Joshua's kind heart felt for her. She was engaged in preparing tea, and thought it wise to create a diversion by saying,

"Come, Mrs. John, you sit down here. A dish o' tea'll refresh you. And the little gurl What's your name?—Nellie? Dear Heart! That's a pretty name, now. And what a head o' hair, Mrs. John! It's a real wonder, it is.

Come, sit you here . . . And now, Sam, you hand the kettle."

Uncle Joshua sat down opposite his niece, and fixed a pair of hard, unwinking eyes upon her.

"Your mother says you are pretty good at arithmetic—got to compound fractions yet?"

Nellie's mouth being full of buttered toast, she could only nod.

"Know your jography? What's the capital of Ireland—eh?"

"Edinburgh," she spluttered forth.

"I thought as much," said Uncle Joshua, sarcastically. "I'm never very far wrong. I thought what the schooling at Ripple'd be like. It's well she's come here, if she's ever to get on in life."

"Please, Uncle Joshua, I forgot," cried the child, reddening to the roots of her hair. "It's Dublin, and it contains 260,000 inhabitants."

Thereupon the discomfited mother plucked up heart to say,

"Indeed, Joshua, she's quick at her book. They all say so. That's why I thought it

wrong to refuse your kindness. If she'd bin like me—just good for house-work, and no more—I wouldn't ha' consented to part with her. But she likes her book better than anything; and, as Master Wilfred said to me, 'You've no right to deny the child the advantage that's offered to her.' ”

“Who is Master Wilfred?”

“Our lord's son. He takes a great interest—a very great interest—in Nellie, he do, and so does her ladyship, his mother. She gave her that cloak and hat, and her new prayer-book and bible. Oh! she has bin very kind to us.”

“The best Saxony cloth, I declare!” said Mrs. Joshua, holding up the cloak admiringly.

“What would John have said to that, Susan?” asked her brother-in-law, with a grim smile—“John, who couldn't abide the aristocracy! I always told him it'd come to him, or his, having to accept their charity. There's nothing like keeping independent. Look at me. I owe no one anything—I never was beholden to any man for the price of a loaf, I'm proud to say.

That's why I stand where I do in this town to-day, Susan."

"I am sure it does you great credit—I always says so," murmured Mrs. Dawson; then, struck by a sudden thought, she continued, with more vivacity—"Still, you see, if I held by that altogether, I shouldn't accept your kindness in paying for Nellie's schooling—though relations, to be sure, is different."

"They're not *bound*; I never give in to that, remember," observed Joshua, with stern alacrity. "I make no promises as to the future for your girl. What I say I'll do, I'll *do*. Having no girl of my own, I'll educate yours, and she shall come here on holidays till her schooling is done, and she's fit to make a good living for herself in the world. If you hadn't set yourself against it, you could have lived hard by, and seen the child every Sunday; but you was obstinate, and——"

"Say no more about that, Joshua," murmured the recipient of his bounty, hurriedly. "It may be foolish, but I couldn't abide to leave the house where John and me lived, and where

he died, so I must just be content to see the child twice a year, when she comes home—but I thank you, all the same. I'm sure I'd no call to expect that you'd be so kind to us."

"That's because you don't know him rightly yet, Mrs. Dawson," cried his wife. "Joshua's heart's in the right place. Him and me'll look after the little gurl, depend on it, and she shall come here on every half-holiday, and Sam'll take her a walk, won't ye, Sam?"

"I shouldn't wonder," laughed Sam, running his fingers through his hair, and then cutting a huge piece of cake, he handed it gallantly to his cousin. Clearly his father's presence quelled him, for he said no more. The latter, after an interval employed in imbibing his tea from the saucer, with a sound as of escaping steam, looked up at Mrs. Dawson and said—

"I shall take you to the seminary to-morrow."

She thought he said cemetery, which she had been told was the refined name for a burial-ground, and she was somewhat startled. He continued, however—

"It is a first-class establishment. Sound

English education. Turns out a lot of girls able to earn their fifty pound a year every half. They say there's a great opening now in New Zealand. California, too, has been spoke of favourably, but the market for educated female labour there is getting over-stocked. A great trade is done with Roosia—and there's no doubt but what I shall place her advantageously somewhere, if the girl works. If she don't, there's no use in my spending my money, and she'll have to go back and scrub the floors; that's all. 'Knowledge is Power,' as I've wrote to you more than once. Look at me. Where should I be, if it wasn't for my education? And I've given Sam the best of educations, too, only he don't take to work, as I did. Why, I worked at a night-school for three years, ma'am, after I was turned thirty, and hard at my trade all day, too. No publics for *me*. That's how I rose, and how I come to be looked up to in this town. Ask any man in Warmington whether there's a name as is more respected than Joshua Dawson's."

He glared defiantly round, and his poor

sister-in-law's spirits sank lower and lower. Had she come all the way from Ripple for this? Joshua's heart was, no doubt, in the right place; but his self-assertion crushed her. And then to think of his wanting to send Nellie to New Zealand or California? And to talk of the "trade with Roosia" being good, as if her child were like one of the slaves she had heard of, to be sold in the market! It made the poor mother's blood run cold. But no; not even Joshua's imperiousness should prevail here. Nellie should never be sent to foreign parts, not even for the certainty of so fabulous an income as fifty pounds a year.

CHAPTER V.

IF this were a book with "a purpose," it might be worth while to trace the influence of circumstances upon Nellie Dawson's character in her early girlhood; to note how the training to which she was subjected in the good middle-class school where she remained four years, and the companions with whom she was thrown, brought into prominence certain qualities which might otherwise have lain dormant. But we are concerned with effects rather than cause, and, as none of these companions crossed that after-path which we have made it our task to trace, a few words will suffice to tell of the years that intervened between the day that Mrs. Dawson brought her

little girl to Warmington, and the period when our narration recommences.

Her school-days were, upon the whole, happy; and, as the authorities reported favourably every half year of his niece's progress, Uncle Joshua could extract inexhaustible food for self-laudation from the success of his magnanimous scheme.

"My niece, sir, has taken a prize again at the seminary. A very promising scholar, sir, and highly commended for industry and good conduct—owes it all to me."

"What?—the good conduct?" asks that low fellow, Jones. Mr. Dawson treats the remark, as it deserves, with silent contempt, and it does not prevent his telling the next neighbour he sees the same story in much the same words.

The girl, in truth, possessed no startling ability; but she had a fair memory, and she had learnt now what the ambition "to rise" meant. Not for herself so much as to satisfy her uncle, to please her mother; perhaps on the chance of a smile and word of congratulation

from some one else, when she went home at midsummer. Her early love of books had grown with her growth, though her inclination led her still to poetry and works of imagination, which were deemed unserviceable, if not pernicious, to a girl in her station. Ah! Wilfred had much to answer for in that first present of Border ballads to the little maid. She knew "King Cophetua" and many others by heart now, and recited them of winter evenings to a select circle, when the schoolmistress was out of hearing.

Of what value could such literature be to a young person destined for the servitude of the school-room, if not of the nursery? Miss Dawson was found reading "Marmion" and the "Lady of the Lake," works only suited to romantic young ladies, and which, as the schoolmistress said, could store her mind with no useful knowledge. It is a way some have, when youth is craving for bread, to offer it a stone. For the rest, she was a good girl. (Unfortunately, much too pretty, for it would stand in the way of her advancement.) Amiable

and industrious in school ; a favourite with both masters and playmates ; but the mistress shook her head when she spoke of Nellie's future prospects. " She is too soft and too sentimental ever to make much of teaching ; she has not the stuff in her to keep a class of unruly children in order. I'm sure I don't know what we are to do with her. It is a pity, after all Mr. Joshua is spending on her education ; but I am afraid she will disappoint him. Her head is stuffed with poetry, and such rubbish, and she sadly wants firmness. She'll be blown this way or that by anyone she is fond of."

The judgments we form of one another in life are often wide of the truth ; but perhaps none are so fallacious as those pronounced on the characters of the very young. When the orchard is a flush of blossom, how can we determine which buds shall be nipped by cold winds, and out of which the goodly fruit shall be formed in due season ? The analogy is not strictly correct ; for the human tree, in youth, is subject to absolute change of character (due, possibly, to subtle influences we do not note),

whereas we know that grapes do not grow from thistles. That the schoolmistress's forecast of her docile little pupil's character was erroneous will be seen by-and-by. Whether a more delicate acumen would have arrived at a different conclusion at this stage of the girl's young life we will not determine.

Her midsummer holiday of one month had been passed at Ripple each year; but it so happened that only twice in the course of these four years had the young hero of her childhood been at Athelstone when Nellie was at home, and even then it was but for a few days. He was travelling abroad with his tutor, or he was in London, and the happiness to which the child had looked forward of hearing his approving words was denied her the last two years of her school-life. Each Christmas Mrs. Dawson made a pilgrimage of a fortnight to meet her child at Warmington. Uncle Joshua had ordained that his niece should spend the short winter holiday at his house, and Mrs. Dawson felt, as this included an invitation to herself, warmly pressed by her sister-in-law, that it would be ungracious

to offer any opposition to the plan. It was not unmitigated joy to the poor mother, for her benefactor was a severe trial, especially on Sundays, when the family enjoyed the unlimited benefit of his society. During the remainder of the week, however, he was devoted to his business for nine or ten hours daily, and Nellie and her mother had long mornings, during which they could converse unreservedly, without other interruption than the occasional visits of Mrs. Joshua to the parlour, fussy with her household matters, but ever beaming with kindness.

On her last visit to Warmington, Sam had been a little trouble to Mrs. Dawson. With the keen eye of a mother, she saw, what apparently no one else did, that the young man's attention to Nellie, who was still considered as a child by her uncle and aunt, was something more than cousinly. The way in which his eyes followed her, the efforts he made to secure a *tête-à-tête* walk with her, his little presents, his whisperings in corners, were indications that were not lost on Mrs. Dawson. Under any

circumstances she would have been strongly opposed to a marriage between the cousins; but, placed as she was in reference to Uncle Joshua, it would be unendurable that this attempt at flirtation on Sam's part should grow into serious attachment which she could not doubt would rouse his father's ire, and cause disunion between the families. That Nellie herself was innocent of any attempt to encourage Sam's devotion, and was, indeed, blind to it, accepting it all as part of the same ornamented surface wherewith it pleased him to decorate his intercourse with the world at large, Mrs. Dawson felt sure. She knew her child; anything like coquetry was foreign from her nature; and, courted though Sam might be by some of the Warmington damsels, his aunt had an intuition which she would not have ventured to put into words that it would never be given to the young man to inspire a serious passion.

All the same was it a secret annoyance to her that the vacuity of her nephew's leisure should be filled, whenever his cousin was a guest at

his father's, by unremitting attentions which might hurt him in the end more than they could affect her; as insects who leave their stings behind them die none the less though the material on which the poison is expended be invulnerable.

Revolving these things in her mind on her return home at the end of the third Christmas, when Nellie had nearly completed her fifteenth year, the good woman arrived at the conclusion that, whatever Uncle Joshua might say, the girl should not spend her holidays again at Warmington. Mrs. Dawson would in the meantime consult Lady Athelstone as to her daughter's future, before the latter returned home at midsummer. She was very nearly the top of the school, and certainly able to gain her livelihood by teaching in some form; and, though Uncle Joshua spoke of keeping his niece at Warmington another year, Mrs. Dawson felt, on every account, the desirability of obtaining her a situation, if possible, before the expiration of that time.

The widow's difficulties were happily solved

one May morning by a visit from Lady Athelstone. The pupil-teacher at the Warley School was to leave at midsummer, and Lady Athelstone proposed that Nellie should be a candidate for the post. It was the thing of all others Mrs. Dawson would most have desired; her child to live with her, and yet be profiting by her education to earn a fair livelihood. It seemed to the poor woman an ideal piece of good fortune. But Uncle Joshua, when the intelligence was conveyed to him, did not so regard it.

What! a miserable pittance of fifteen pounds a year, after all the money he had spent on her education, when she might, in the course of a year or two, easily get double? And no one would take her as a governess after she had once lowered herself so. Pray what was the use of her French verbs, and her piano, and ancient history, and all the rest of it now? It was recklessly throwing away her advantages and truckling to the aristocracy, for this was all Lady Athelstone's doing. The girl wasn't "finished," and he had meant to pay

for another year's schooling for her, "and then my niece would be independent, sir—independent of all my Lady Athelstones, able to support herself, and snap her fingers in their faces. But now—a miserable pupil-teacher! Her mother's a fool, sir, an obstinate fool!"

Her folly might be debateable; not all his hearers were convinced that Joshua's sister-in-law was wrong; but of her obstinacy there could be no doubt. To reject a prospect which offered all the poor woman desired at present for her child, because their benefactor had other views for his niece, was a sacrifice she did not feel herself called upon to make. Her letters to the potentate of the Dawson family were deprecatory and grateful; but she remained, in spite of angry remonstrance, immoveable in her resolve.

She knew that Joshua was aware of one of her chief reasons for electing to withdraw Nellie from Warmington; and she could not doubt that Sam's father viewed the case as she did. That he should persist, therefore, in urging her child's return to his house, she

could only regard, under the circumstances, as an instinct of his unreasoning love of domination. Danger to Sam's peace of mind was not to be regarded (nor Nellie's, either, for that matter). He had ordained that her schooling was to continue another year, and everything ought to have been made to bend to his will.

She passed her examination satisfactorily, and, backed by Lady Athelstone's influence, obtained the coveted appointment. Some doubts as to her health standing the drudgery of daily tuition were expressed; the girl had evidently outgrown her strength of late, and looked fragile and willowy. But her courage and good will were indomitable; she smiled at the notion of not being able to work as hard as any other girl of sixteen.

Nevertheless, the few weeks after her return home, before entering on her new duties, were an interval of enjoyed rest to Nellie. In the blue shadow of apple-trees, upon the long June grass, she lay for hours, reprehensibly idle as

to her fingers, her late schoolmistress would have declared, and, possibly, her good conscientious mother might have admitted, while attributing her child's indolence to the languor of over-rapid growth. But, in truth, she was not idle; the imagination was lifted, the thoughts expanded, her receptive nature filled with the vivid pictures that Pope's "Iliad," or Spenser's "Fairy Queen,"—old volumes from the village library—supplied. The brain was growing, the character was consolidating, day by day. Keble's "Christian Year," given her by Lady Athelstone at the time, formed an epoch in her life. That closely-knit poetry of a lofty dogmatism, which teaches the renunciation of private judgment, and the acceptance of a sharply-defined faith in the inexplicable, fastened upon her memory with its clear and high-strung music. Her nature heard and answered the appeal. Often, in after-years, when sore troubled and perplexed, some couplet of that little volume tended to strengthen and uphold her.

Rumours of a disquieting character touching "Master Wilfred," as he was still called, reached Warley, and even the remoter Ripple, early that spring. The butler had gathered fragments of conversation between my lord and my lady which, being compared with certain other fragments dropped from the eaves into the ears of the lady's-maid, went to show that the young gentleman had got into some scrape at Oxford, for which he was threatened with "rustication,"—whatever that strange word might mean. Whether he had said or done anything subversive of Church or State, whether he had broken any law against God or Man, was not patent to the original purveyors of this gossip; but by the time it had permeated through the still-room-maid to the head coachman, and from him, in strict confidence, to the publican at the "Hen and Chickens," and from him all through the village of Ripple, till it reached the ears of Mrs. Dawson and her daughter, the first stitches were lost in the mass of embroidery which each narrator in turn, having so wide a canvas

given him, felt it his duty to add as he listed.

The old lord was liked and respected; his tenants generally expressed their regret that his son was not more like him. The female portion of the community, indeed, was disposed to regard leniently the fact that he did not know mangel-wurzel when he saw it, that he never rode straight to hounds in his life, and that he was but an indifferent shot. The impenetrable smoke caused by this far-off fire of his iniquity—whatever it might be—almost suffocated the good people of Ripple. They choked and spluttered, swallowing it all, or angrily rejecting it, according to their proclivities. He was a terrible young gentleman, given up to idolatry, and a dissolute life, or he was the handsomest, sweetest-spoken, kindest-hearted youth that ever walked this earth. Mrs. Dawson, it is needless to say, was at the head of those who took the latter view, and declined to believe a single word reflecting upon his character.

Whatever the scandal was, the young man

was not rusticated, and the following June he got "the Newdigate," which gratified Lady Athelstone, and afforded his father the mildest measure of satisfaction. It was a triumph which seemed to him of the most trumpery description. If books were his line, why didn't he go in for honours? Why waste his time in writing all this trash about Carthage, which no human being would ever want to read? He had passed his "Mods," and, having done so, he appeared to have abandoned all honourable ambition in his University career. His time seemed to be spent in making wild, foolish speeches, writing idiotic pamphlets and verses ("some people think them beautiful," mildly remonstrated the fond mother), and leading a very irregular life. He feared that the gaining this prize would only fortify his son in the delusion that he was a great poet, and unfit him yet further for the duties of his future station.

All the same, it was a great consolation to poor Lady Athelstone, after some keen disquietude touching her son, to be able to dis-

seminate the positive and thoroughly respectable piece of intelligence that he had written the prize-poem at Oxford for that year.

CHAPTER VI.

IT was the morning of Trinity Sunday—the first Sunday that Nellie had entered upon her new duties. She felt a little shy as she came into church, in her neat straw hat and spotless linen frock, marshalling the children with the utmost dignity of which she was capable, but fearing that it fell short of what the position demanded. She glanced round; no one seemed to pay any particular attention to her except “mother;” she, of course, from her seat in the side-aisle was watching her daughter with satisfaction, as the pleased eyes testified. The place appointed for the school and its teachers was in the chancel, immediately in front of the great Athelstone pew, which was

entered by a small side-door from the park. When Nellie took her seat, the pew was empty. Not until she turned to kneel in the Confession did she see Lord and Lady Athelstone and their son.

She buried her face in her hands, so that none could observe the flush of pleasurable surprise that mounted there, and then, with contrite distinctness, she told her Heavenly Father aloud that she had strayed from His ways like a lost sheep, had done those things which she ought not to have done, and was a miserable offender.

Wilfred had come down from London with Lord and Lady Athelstone for a couple of nights. He was now twenty-one, having attained his majority the previous January. Physically he was much improved, though still too slight, and with shoulders too disproportioned in width to the size of his head to be a model of manly grace. The head itself, however, was remarkable, and very attractive, with its broad radiant brow, beautiful eyes, and the winning smile that broke at times over the full and somewhat sarcastic mouth. It was this

agro-dolce, perhaps, which lent a peculiar charm to the face. Men rarely admired him; but to eyes that are not extreme to mark what is amiss in carriage—for he slouched almost ostentatiously, it may be said—he was a strikingly handsome young man. This habit of walk, and his wearing his hair very long, and brushed back in a wild, distraught way, were peculiarities which angered his father, who told his son that he looked “like some d——d foreign musician.”

For the rest, there was a change in him for the better, and a change in him for the worse, since he was sixteen. His antagonism to the things that he had taken too deep root in his nature for him to be any longer explosively contradictory in ordinary conversation. And thus his intercourse with his father was governed by a reticence which delighted Lady Athelstone, who never saw much below the surface, and satisfied the household (who had heard how Master Wilfred used to aggravate my lord in days gone by) that a complete concord of sentiment existed between father and son.

His principles—or the theories he was pleased, at this time, to consider as such—and his views of life—all in an inchoate or transitive condition—will be developed by-and-by. The points in his character which concern us now were these: that he had come to church, in violation of his convictions, out of consideration to his father and mother; and that, finding himself there, in front of Nellie Dawson's lovely face, he made no effort to detach his thoughts from her, but watched the girl's every movement with interest.

He had scarcely thought of her during the last two years since he had been at Oxford, except as a favourite line of poetry which recurs to the memory from time to time. He *thought* that he had thought of her constantly, but it was not so. She had been absent from Ripple each time that he had been home. Now, when he faced the prospect of three months with no one to indoctrinate, and in utter solitude of spirit, the hope of renewing that idyllic episode of his boyhood leapt up strong again within him.

And there she was, before him ; and as he beheld her, shot up into a tall, graceful girl, infinitely more beautiful than he remembered her, all the boy's passionate admiration for the child revived with double force. How unlike she was to everything around her ! Romeo's simile occurred to him. " Like a snowy dove trooping with crows." She knelt, and his eye followed the lines of her lithe young figure, round waist, and delicate throat, with the knot of burnished brown hair beneath her hat. She rose ; there was nothing of the clumsy village lass about her movements ; and in her responses, of which he heard every word, the intonation was unvulgar, and the voice sweet and clear. By-and-by she turned to the east, in the Athanasian Creed, so that he saw her perfect profile, and the down-drooped lashes, and sweet lips parted ; and he heard the confession of belief that fell from them with terrible distinctness " *Which Faith, except everyone do keep whole and undefiled ; without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.*"

The young man frowned, and then smiled

contemptuously ; but, happily, no one observed him.

“ So Nellie Dawson has been made a pupil-teacher, I see, mother,” said Wilfred, immediately they left the church. “ I suppose you got it for her. Why didn't you tell me ? ”

“ I meant to, my dear, but I forgot it . . . I knew you would be interested, having known her from a child. I have really had so much to do and to think of that——”

“ Of course . . . How she is improved ! She is much too good for a pupil-teacher.”

“ Too good, my dear ? ”

“ I mean too refined and distinguished-looking. What a type for ‘ Una ! ’ such purity ! ”

“ ‘ Una ’ ? Who was she ? This is a very well-conducted girl. She has brought back an excellent character from school.”

“ How could it be otherwise with that face ? Is she clever ? ”

“ She passed her examination very well. I don't know that she is *clever*. She may be, and she may not. She has not been here long

enough for the head-mistress to judge, I should think."

"Her judgment would go for nothing with me The girl looks miles above that woman—miles above everyone in church, indeed."

"What's that?" said Lord Athelstone, who had walked on in front, and stopped, overhearing his son's last words. "Miles above everyone in church?"

"I was speaking of the new pupil-teacher. It is curious the way in which Nature, now and again, asserts her right to ignore our class-distinctions, and creates a perfect creature like this, who, as novelists say, 'looks made to be a duchess,'—though, in reality, half the duchesses are like housekeepers."

"Stuff! You appear to think that distinction consists in being tall and thin." (Lord Athelstone was short and thick-set.) "That's a very nice-looking girl, and she has a good face. I liked, too, the distinct way in which she responded to the Creed. But everyone in his proper place. Put that girl into a drawing-

room, with your duchesses, and see how she would look."

"I should be sorry for the duchesses," said Wilfred, carelessly, with a smile; then turned the subject abruptly to ask his father some question about his home-farm, the gate of which they were passing.

Lady Athelstone usually attended the afternoon service; but, when luncheon was over to-day, she declared it was too hot, and she could not face the walk across the park a second time. She was additionally and most agreeably surprised, therefore, when her son said he thought of going. Lady Athelstone had experienced some vague fears lately as to his orthodoxy; but this set the mother at rest. She took care to draw her lord's attention to the fact in the course of the day; but he seemed hardly to attach as much importance to it as she could have wished.

The service was over, the little congregation was dispersed, and still Wilfred lingered in the churchyard. What was he waiting for? He

had seen her again with the children. Did he expect that she would return here when they were dispersed? Hardly; and yet he wandered among the grass-grown graves until he found the one whose headstone told how John Dawson had departed this life eight years before. It was curious the turn his thoughts took. Was that active, turbulent spirit at rest, or was it possible that he still watched over his child? Amid all his theological doubts, Wilfred clung to the immortality of the soul. Did the dead man see him now? Did he frown and motion him back from the pursuit of that innocent child? Wilfred said to himself that he meant no harm; yet he turned away, and left the churchyard. But, when once he was in the road, the habit of self-gratification was stronger than superstitious and fanciful scruples, and he saw no reason why he should not pay Mrs. Dawson a visit.

He reached the lane in which her cottage stood, and opened the wicket. The flowers were in full bloom on either side the narrow pathway; the cabbage roses, sweet-williams,

and sweet peas; and the bees, whose hive stood in an angle of the little garden, were humming busily everywhere. Only the cottage itself was silent; a tortoiseshell cat lay blinking in the sunshine on the doorstep; but the door, when he tried, after knocking, to raise the latch, proved to be locked.

Very well; he would sit down on that old cask, partly under the shadow of the house, partly under the apple-tree, and wait. He was to return to London with his father and mother the next day. He would not be down here again for a month. He was not used to being balked; the dinner at Athelstone would not be for another three hours; he would pass two and a half of them here, and it would be hard if he did not get speech of Nellie in that time.

The afternoon sped by; the bees murmured on among the flowers, the cat slept tranquilly, an insignificant bird or two twittered among the fruit-trees, a white butterfly poised on the blue bottle-brush beside him; there was the distant lowing of cattle, the occasional bark of

a dog on the road; no cart-wheels, no cry or grind of labour, for it was Sunday. Such sounds as there only served to enhance the tranquillity; man, and the beasts of the field that serve him were at rest; that portion of creation only that was free sang its low, under song of enjoyment.

After a time, Wilfred pulled out his note-book, and began writing. His muse at this time was draped in a somewhat pre-Raphaelite garb of the Italian cut, that delights in *conceitti*, and it was not always as easy to follow his embodiments of human emotion as it was in the present instance. He never got beyond the first stanza, which ran thus:—

“I looked for Love among the leaves of June,
But only Beauty, passionless and pale,
Glided, white-robed, adown the flowery dale,
To the gold twilight of the afternoon.
I struck my cythern, telling the old tale
That Love hath some time heard and answered soon.
My passionate singing was of no avail.
Beauty returned not, Love denied the boon
I sought, and, sorrowful as exiles feel,
I watched the darkness o'er the landscape steal.”

The church clock struck seven. Another

quarter of an hour, and he must turn his steps rapidly homewards, across the woods, unless he meant to be late for dinner. Where could she and her mother be? He had asked himself this question for the twentieth time, when he heard the click of the wicket-latch, and a light step on the pathway. He remained quiet, hidden in some measure by the apple-tree. Nellie came near, twirling the house-key on her finger. She had just placed it in the lock, and was about to turn it, when she saw him seated upon the barrel three yards from her, with an amused look on his face. She started, and turned quite pale.

“I believe the sight of me has actually frightened you,” he began, laughing. “Where have you been? Do you know, I have been waiting here hours to see you.”

“I am very sorry, sir,” she said, with great gravity. “I have been a walk with mother and some of the children.”

“And where is your mother?”

“She stopped in the village to see Mrs. Miles, who is ill, so I came home to put on the

kettle for tea. . . . But I beg your pardon. . . . Will you please to walk in, sir?"

"No. I must be going almost directly. I am only at home for a few hours; but, seeing you in church, I wanted to ask you how you liked your new position. Don't you find it very irksome, keeping those brats in order?"

"No, sir, I have not found it so as yet."

"You will. You're not fit for it, you know."

She looked down, and coloured.

"I am sorry you think that, sir. Indeed, I try to do my best."

"You misunderstand me. I mean that you are a thousand times too good for it. I hear you passed a very good examination."

"Yes," she replied, simply. "But it was not very difficult. . . . I got beyond that at school. . . . May I show you the prize, sir, they gave me at leaving?"

She ran in, and came out the next moment with a gaudily-bound volume in her hand. It was "Paley's Evidences of Christianity."

"Have you read this? and do you under-

stand it?" he asked, abruptly, as he looked at the title.

"I have read parts, only. I think I understand those."

"And you believe it all?"

She looked into his face inquiringly, and remained silent.

"By-the-by, Nellie, I wish you wouldn't respond so fervently in that Creed we had to-day, which condemns everyone to everlasting punishment who doesn't implicitly believe what is incomprehensible."

"I thought I ought to say the responses out loud," she replied, after a momentary hesitation.

"Do you know that you are consigning me with many millions more to everlasting punishment?"

"Oh, sir!" She looked unutterably shocked.

"Creeds do a great deal of harm by trying to force those who have naturally religious instincts, but are . . . well, perhaps unruly . . . into straight waistcoats."

She opened her pretty brown eyes wide.

“But the Creed is in the Prayer-book, sir, and if I go to church——”

“I know what you are thinking, that *I* have no business to go; but I’ve Scripture authority for it. There’s a fellow in the Bible who prayed that it might be forgiven him, when he bowed down in the House of Rimmon.”

“Oh, sir!” cried Nellie, startled out of all shyness by her distress. “You don’t compare our parish church with the House of Rimmon?”

“Only inasmuch as superstition and human invention have spoilt the simple faith in a Creator of this beautiful world. That is what I want you to believe, and nothing more. All that cursing of others only does harm.”

“I’m sure I don’t mean it,” said she, looking contrite. “I suppose it was only put in to frighten people a little.”

“Fancy frightening people into belief! No, Nellie, I shall teach you some day a better sort of belief than that. Promise not to run away from Ripple, till I come down here to stay, in August.”

She opened her eyes wide, and smiled.

“Run away, sir? What should make me run away?”

“You may want to ‘better yourself,’ as it is called. You are thrown away here . . . or you may even think of marriage,” he continued, looking at her searchingly. “You are very young, but there will be plenty of young fellows after you very soon.”

“I have never thought of such a thing,” she said, gravely. “I shall never leave my mother, either to marry or for anything else, sir, as long as I can teach at the school here.”

“You have no higher ambition? Come, now, tell me, as your friend—your *oldest* friend, Nellie—was there no young fellow at Warmington whom you ever thought of as——”

“Never—never!” cried the girl, emphatically.

“I am awfully glad of that,” said Wilfred, slowly. “If there had been, I should like to have punched his head . . . I must go now.” He rose, and took her hand, and held it within both his, while he continued—“Since that first evening when I met you, as a little girl, driving

your cow, you have always been to me like a poem of purity and simplicity. Remain so. Don't let admiration and conventionality spoil you. And remember me. I shall be back again later in the summer."

Then he walked rapidly away.

CHAPTER VII.

A GREAT change, though a subtle and gradual one, began in Nellie from that hour. She was awaking, as the marble nymph awoke beneath Pygmalion's touch—awaking to the life of womanhood, to the consciousness of a heart and senses that were no longer those of a child. But with this consciousness came a terror and a shame from which the poor girl found her only refuge in prayer. Not even to her mother could she pour out her heart; for her mother could never understand her trouble. Only to the Father, from whom no secrets are hid, could she turn for comfort in the silent watches of the night, and, asking His forgiveness for all her wicked and foolish thoughts,

pray to Him for strength to overcome them.

Mrs. Dawson attributed the young girl's extreme quietude and apparent weariness at times to the hard work and confinement in a somewhat close school-room. The weather was relaxing. Nellie was new to the labour of keeping a score of children in order, and her voice, not being strong, was tried by the constant demands upon it. Thus the mother accounted for the change, when she found that her daughter refused to admit that she was unwell, and shrank from seeing the village doctor. Mrs. Dawson hoped the return of cool weather would bring back the rose to her Nellie's cheek; the school-holiday, too, was at hand.

At this juncture she received a letter which surprised and perplexed her a good deal.

Since the expression of Uncle Joshua's dissatisfaction at his niece's being withdrawn from school to accept so poor a post as that of pupil-teacher, Mrs. Dawson had not heard from the family at Warmington. That was three months ago. The letter which now arrived, and which Mrs. Dawson had some difficulty in decipher-

ing, owing to the running stream of words being embanked in so many flowery flourishes, was from Sam's pen. He wrote, he said, by his father's instruction, to request Mrs. Dawson and Nellie to pass the three weeks' holiday which the latter would shortly have at Warmington. Sam, on his own part, warmly expressed a hope that his aunt would accept this invitation ; but, if circumstances should unfortunately prevent her doing so, then Sam proposed, having received, he said, his father's full sanction, to run down to the "Hen and Chickens" at Ripple for a few days, that he might have the pleasure of his aunt's and cousin's society.

Mrs. Dawson, as I have said, was both surprised and perplexed. Could it be that Uncle Joshua, far from being angered, actually encouraged his son's admiration for his cousin? She had told him plainly enough why she thought it better the girl should be removed from Warmington. Yet here he was, not only inviting her expressly to return, but sanctioning Sam's pursuit, even to the "Hen and Chickens!" It was incomprehensible, and she felt sorely

puzzled how to act. The visit to Warmington was, of course, without the pale of consideration; though, under other circumstances, she would have hailed a change of air for her drooping child. And, if Sam chose to come here, of course his aunt could not prevent it. The question was, how to avoid inflicting pain on the young man, and unnecessary annoyance to the girl, without incurring the charge of ingratitude to Uncle Joshua.

“What am I to say to Cousin Sam’s coming here?” she inquired of her daughter, after weighing the matter over in her mind for some hours. She was engaged in ironing when she asked the question, and never looked up. Nellie handed the linen to her from the clothes-horse every now and then. Mrs. Dawson continued—
“It’s a fullish waste o’ money.”

“If Uncle Joshua does not mind that, mother, we ought not to say so, ought we? I think you must say you hope he’ll come.”

“But it isn’t true. I wish he’d stop away.”

“What harm can he do, mother? Perhaps

he is a little vain and silly, but he was always kind to me. He will find everything very poor here, after Warmington, and dull too, I am afraid; but, if he wants to come, you must not mind him, mother. I will keep him out of your way."

"That's just what I don't want," said Mrs. Dawson, ironing more vigorously than ever. "There's no knowing the fullishness as young chaps is capable of talking to girls; and I won't have him come here with his silly stuck-up ways, fancying . . . fancying . . . I don't know what all."

Nellie looked at her mother, surprised, and remained silent for a minute. Then she said, with a smile,

"You think I am still a child, mother."

"No, that's just it. You ain't no longer a child, my dear. That's why I ought to speak out open to you." Here she laid down her iron, and, leaning both hands upon the table, looked at her daughter for the first time as she went on—"Your uncle's bin very good to us. There's no saying as he hasn't, and I should be

sorry if trouble came to his son through us, Nellie."

"What sort of trouble is likely to come to him?"

"I fancy he's a mind to ask you to be his wife."

"What an idea, mother! Sam? . . . Sam, who thinks so much of himself, marry *me*? Why, the Princess Royal is hardly good enough for him!"

"Maybe; but the Princess Royal ain't here, and you are. I'm afraid the lad's fallen in love with you; and, what's more, I don't fancy, somehow, as your uncle minds it. It's strange—I can't make it out. You, without a penny, and his cousin, and all—— It's scarce to be credited; yet it's my opinion as it is so. Now, I don't give you my advice, remember, my dear. You must make up your own mind, if he asks you, what you mean to say. Only, if you don't mean to have him——"

"How can you ask me, mother?" The girl, for once, was roused to something near akin to

indignation. "I shall never, *never* marry any-one; but to think of marrying *Sam!*"

"I didn't believe as you would, my dear. That's why I'm speaking to you now. Else it'd be easy to let things go on as they are. But, if Sam comes here, you must let him understand how it is. It'd be cruel not to show him, plain enough, that it's no use his thinking o' you."

"I think you are mistaken, mother. I'm sure I hope so . . . I hope he won't be so silly as to say anything to me . . . but if he does, well, I will certainly tell him the truth."

After this, no more passed between mother and daughter on the subject. A letter was despatched to Sam, declining with gratitude the invitation to Warmington, and saying that, if he came to the "Hen and Chickens," his aunt would of course be glad to see him, though she feared he would find Ripple dull. She omitted all mention of Nellie's name, and endeavoured to strike the mean between forgetfulness of past obligations and a cordiality which should mislead her too-easily-encouraged nephew.

He came. It was on the afternoon of a day in August, soon after Nellie's holiday had begun. There had been torrents of rain all the morning, but towards five o'clock it cleared; the clouds drifted off, leaving patches of pale blue sky visible; the rushing streams of water, which had forced themselves channels in the sandy roads, subsided, and the birds began calling to each other from the dripping boughs that the sun was not yet gone to bed, and would come out presently.

The town-bred young man, with his tall hat and blue satin tie, his mackintosh and umbrella, excited some attention, as he swaggered up the street, and demanded the way to Mrs. Dawson's cottage.

The mother and daughter were at work as he entered.

“‘I hope I don't intrude?’ as Paul Pry says. How do you do, Aunt Su? . . . How are you, Nell? A little pale. . . Well, here I am; and I hope you are glad to see me, for the journey here is horrible—three changes! These cross lines are the devil.”

“They *are* ill-convenient,” observed his aunt, in a deprecatory tone.

“And what a deal of rain you ’ave in these southern counties. Why, it was quite fine when I left Warmington this morning, and ’ere it’s all of a sop.”

“It was fine here, too, very early,” said Nellie, a little resentful at the aspersion on the Ripple climate.

“Well, you’ve a nice nut-shell of a place,” continued Sam, condescendingly, as he divested himself of his mackintosh, and opened his umbrella to dry. Then he sat down, extended his legs, like a pair of tongs, and looked around him. “It wouldn’t do for the gov’nor, you know. He’s so precious partic’lar; but I don’t mind your rough and ready style, when beauty presides over the ’arth.” The interesting youth here leered at his cousin; but, as she continued stitching, without raising her eyes, it was only Mrs. Dawson who observed the expressive glance.

“I’ve only just cleared away tea, Sam,” she said. “Shall I make you some, or will you

have the cold neck o' mutton, and I'll bile you a potato?"

"No, I shall 'ave supper at the inn, by-and-by; but you may give me a glass o' beer, Nell."

"*I'll* run and fetch you some. It's only roun' the corner; but Nellie's a bit tired," said his aunt.

"Bless my stars! No beer in the 'ouse? But, Lor', do you think I'd let you fetch beer for me? No, that won't do, Aunt Su. Make me a cup o' tea. That's the ticket . . . and Nellie shall pour it out for me, won't you? . . . Why, you sit there like mum-chance! Haven't you word to say to me, after four months? . . . Ah! Nellie, the 'igh Street 'as seemed an 'owling wilderness to me since you went."

"I seldom went into High Street,"—the girl roused herself to reply, laughing—"so I'm afraid I cannot take your compliment to myself, Sam. But you haven't told us yet how uncle and aunt are?"

"Oh! pretty bobbish. I say, Nell," he continued, seeing that his aunt had gone into the

kitchen to set the kettle on the fire, "what do you think the gov'nor says? That 'e feels as though you were 'is daughter. He often says there's no gal in Warmington he'd so soon 'ave for a daughter."

"That's very kind of Uncle Joshua," returned his cousin, quietly. "It is because I am the only girl who ever stayed in his house. Of course, he would take to others just as much, if he knew them all as well."

"Not at all. He ain't very soft-hearted, ain't the gov'nor. *You* know that, Nell; but he's right down fond of you, and no mistake." Here Mrs. Dawson returned, and Sam, with some show of hesitation, pulled out a photograph, framed in scarlet leather, from his pocket. "I've brought this for you, Nell. I 'ad it done on purpose. I'm afraid it ain't very good. . . In fact, it's a 'orrid thing. They say it don't do me justice, and I believe it's— Anyways, it ain't *flattering*; but, such as it is, it will remind you, when absent, of yours truly, eh?"

Mrs. Dawson looked over Nellie's shoulder,

and they both exclaimed, "Oh!"

"But it's the very image of you, Sam!"

"Just the way you always sit."

"And the expression of the mouth! and the whiskers!"

"And the curl of the hair! and the collar!"

"And the tip of the nose!"

"Oh! come, now, my nose ain't so snub as that—and the tie don't sit so genteel as mine—and the light on the 'air makes me look as though I was bald."

"Well, it's a most capital likeness," maintained his aunt. "Say what you will, Sam."

"I really think you ought to be quite satisfied," chimed in his cousin. "I don't think it *could* be better."

Let us acknowledge this was aggravating. To be told by the object of one's affections that the monstrosity in her hand does you ample justice would be trying to more philosophical natures than Sam's.

"Well, there are those as think different," said he, running his fingers through his hair, and looking round the humble little room in

vain for a square inch of mirror. "There are those that think I'm a deal better-favoured than that beastly thing. I wouldn't have brought it, if I'd thought you'd have bin so unkind as to say that, Nellie."

"I can't help saying what I think, Sam. I am sorry it hurts you—you shouldn't have asked me."

"You think me a fright, I suppose, *now*, then?" He was by this time in a state of considerable irritation. "You didn't *always*. But it's out of sight, out of mind, I suppose, with you as with so many."

"What fullishness you're talking, Sam," said his aunt, almost sternly. "Out o' sight, out o' mind, indeed! What's that got to do with the pictur' being like you or not? You think a deal too much of what others think about you, Sam. That's your fault."

"Oh! of course; and I come all the way from Warmington to Ripple to be told that by *you*, aunt. Well, I didn't expect it of you, and——"

"Now, take your tea, Sam, and hold your tongue. You're no better than a big baby,

flaring up like that, when no one means nothing unkind. Why, what does a man's looks signify? If we all made ourselves, we'd all be beauties. *You* can't help being what you are any more than I can. It's what we *does* in life, Sam, that signifies—that draws hearts to us like, and makes us remembered when we're gone. You're little better than a lad, and have got life before you. Don't you waste it all in folly, Sam."

He drank his tea in silence. He was thoroughly put out. This was not the kind of reception he had looked for. He had expected to meet with great consideration; firstly, as Sam, irresistible to Nellie as to her sex in general; secondly, as son and heir of the prosperous Joshua Dawson. His aunt and cousin, though they lived in this mean cottage, seemed to have no respect for his position; and the way in which they had spoken of his nose—it was disgusting. He felt, like the man in the parable, "Some enemy hath done this." Some fellow had come between him and Nellie, and

had turned the hearts of both the women against him; there was no accounting for such conduct otherwise. Mrs. Dawson tried to make conversation, her daughter threw in a remark or two; but Sam maintained a dogged silence until he had finished his tea. Then he rose, and, looking at his cousin, said—

“It’s a fine evenin’. I s’pose you ain’t goin’ to refuse to take a walk with me?”

She glanced up at her mother, but laid down her work and rose. Mrs. Dawson interposed.

“Indeed, Sam, and I think, if you’d excuse her, she’s a deal better at home. She’s bin that tired and weakly of late that I haven’t liked her to walk at all, and——”

“Oh, mother,” said Nellie, quickly, seeing the angry cloud on Sam’s face, “I have not been outside the door to-day, and the air will do me good. Sam won’t take me too far . . . I’ll run and put on my hat.”

She returned a moment later, and the cousins left the cottage together.

“Well, p’rhaps it’s better,” said Mrs. Dawson

to herself, as she watched them turn down the lane towards the Athelstone woods. "I s'pose he'll speak now, and she'll give him his answer, and then there will be an end to it."

There was an end to it; but not quite the one she anticipated.

They had been walking nearly a quarter of an hour on the outskirts of the Athelstone wood. Sam had by this time quite recovered his good humour, together with his self-confidence, which had only received a temporary shock. He was depicting in all the glowing colours his imagination could suggest the joys incident to an existence spent in a back street in Warmington, "in a 'ouse of my own, with the party of my choice." He was approaching his object in view by this sure, if circuitous, route, from which Nellie saw no side-path of escape, and with a beating heart she awaited the moment which her mother had foreseen, and which the girl felt she must nerve herself to meet. She certainly had never felt so ill-disposed towards her cousin as now, never had his vulgarity and conceit been so offensive to

her. She felt inclined to cry. If she could only get rid of him! Why, oh! why did she ever consent to come out?

Just then, when Sam's blatant voice had, in his excitement, reached its culminating point, a gate in the Athelstone wall close at hand was opened, and Wilfred stood before them. Nellie was so startled that she gave a faint cry, and, unconsciously, grasped the hand he held out to her for support.

The two men stared at each other, the one with his shabby shooting-jacket, long hair and slouching gait, possessing with it all the unmistakable air of a gentleman, the other, in spite of his spick-and-span clothes, best dog-skin gloves, and erect carriage, the unmistakable air of a snob. He glared angrily, and tilted his nose at Wilfred. The latter surveyed him calmly from head to foot, as he spoke to the girl whose hand he held.

"How is you mother, Nellie? I was on my way to your cottage. I only came home to-day."

"Mother is very well, thank you, sir,"

she replied, feebly, as she disengaged her hand.

“And who is this person?” inquired Wilfred, rather coldly. “A stranger to me.”

“It is my cousin Sam, sir. . . . Uncle Joshua’s son, who’s come from Warmington to—to see us.”

“From Warmington? That’s a long distance,” said Wilfred, addressing Sam, but without the shadow of a smile on his somewhat scornful mouth. “How long do you stay?”

“As long as I feel inclined. I ain’t taken a return-ticket,” replied Sam, eyeing the stranger fiercely.

“Oh! indeed. . . . Well, I won’t interrupt your walk any longer, Nellie. I hope you will enjoy it. But my mother wishes to see you tomorrow morning. Can you come up before eleven?—or are you too much occupied with your cousin to spare the time?”

The poor child was so confused and annoyed that she could only stammer out,

“Of course, sir, I shall wait upon my lady.”

Then he nodded, and, without taking any further notice of Sam, walked on.

That young man was struck dumb for a moment at the mention of "my lady;" then his ire found tongue—

"So that's my lord, is it? And a seedy-looking lot 'e is, and as impudent a one as ever I met—looking at me like that, and I'm every bit as good as 'e is, d——n him. I dessay the gov'nor could buy 'im up; these haristocrats are mostly sewn up, I'm told. I'm sure 'is coat looks like it. Why, I wouldn't pick it off a dung-hill!"

"You're not worthy to do it," cried Nellie, struggling between her anger and her tears. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, speaking so rudely to Mr. Wilfred when he was good enough to address you, Sam. What must he think of you? I felt so ashamed—and he who has been so good to us?"

"Oh! that's the ticket, is it? I ought to grovel in the dust and lick 'is feet when 'e condescends to speak to me, eh? I tell you

what it is. I don't care *that*," and Sam snapped his fingers defiantly in the direction Wilfred had taken, "what 'e thinks of me, or any dozen like 'im. But now I know the sort of man 'e is, let 'im look out, that's all. I can see through a nine-inch wall as well as any chap, I flatter myself. 'E'd better take care what 'e's after.

"What do you mean, Sam? I think you are mad."

"Never you mind. I know what's what. I ain't got eyes in my 'ead for nothing. It's no puzzle now why we're so changed—that's all; why a fellow who you was glad enough *once* to walk with, when he comes down here is ridiculed and abused, and treated like this."

"I will walk with you no more, Sam," said his cousin, stopping dead short and looking him in the face. "I don't know what you mean, but your temper is quite changed since old days. You seem to wish to make yourself disagreeable, and I won't go on listening to you. I shall go home."

She turned away, and this seemed to bring

him to his senses. He followed, and in humbled accents entreated her to continue their walk; he had so much still to say to her; he begged her pardon; his temper had got the better of him just now; but his tongue should not offend again. She remained obdurate, however. She declared, what was indeed the truth, that she felt tired. The emotions of the last ten minutes had quite upset her. To listen to Sam's declaration now was beyond her powers.

He was upon his best behaviour the rest of the evening; but Nellie crept to bed early. Sam said no word to his aunt of what had passed.

CHAPTER VIII.

WILFRED ATHELSTONE'S rage, as he walked away, was none the less that it was self-contained. He could glance coldly at Sam, and nod carelessly to Nellie, but his blood boiled with indignation all the same. That angelic girl "keeping company" with a vulgar brute like this! Had it been a simple plough-boy, Wilfred felt that he could have tolerated him better than this impudent, swaggering snob.

The chief attraction he had held out to himself in returning home to pass his long vacation was the prospect of seeing Nellie Dawson daily; of instructing and elevating her mind; in short, of moulding this beautiful and, as he doubted

not, plastic clay, to his liking. And what after this? He never asked himself. If the thought suggested itself, he put it away. He shut his eyes to anything beyond the pleasure the hours thus spent would afford him. A man with more self-control would have resolved to shun such peril; peril to himself no less than to her, unless he was prepared to sacrifice father and mother to a passion which as yet had been nourished chiefly by his imagination. But Wilfred, with too kind a heart knowingly to inflict pain, had never consulted any other law than that of his inclination. Happily it had not led him to indulge very deeply in the dissipations common to his age. A woman without refinement, a woman whom he could not surround with something of the halo of romance, could gain no real ascendancy over him. He had made the acquaintance of many such who had striven to ensnare him; but he had never been subjugated for more than a few hours. He had broken his bonds like Samson, and regarded Dalilah cynically as a subject for dramatic study.

The fact is, his principles about women, as about religion, were as yet only sketched in wavering, undeterminate lines. He had read Mary Wolstonecraft, Godwin and Shelley. He felt inclined to believe, with the latter, that "Love withers under restraint; its very essence is liberty; it is compatible neither with obedience, jealousy, nor fear; it is there most pure, perfect, and unlimited, where its votaries live in confidence, equality, and unreserve." And, as a natural corollary from this proposition, he was wont to maintain in discussions with his friends that constancy had no virtue in itself, and that people should remain united only so long as they loved each other. At this time, indeed, the idea of marriage, of a tie binding him for life, was practically repugnant to him; though, regarded as a mystical and entirely delightful union of two congenial spirits, it appealed to the poetic side of his nature. To pass one's life at the feet of an ideal woman was a rapturous dream; but was there any woman in the flesh at whose feet he could pass his life?

He said to himself that he should probably

never marry. As regarded the little village maid, whose sweet eyes and modest ways had first attracted him as a child, he certainly did not contemplate any such act of egregious folly. If he disgraced himself—so his father would consider it—by marrying beneath him, Wilfred knew that Lord Athelstone would never forgive his son. Indifferent as he was to social distinctions himself, his parents valued them as next in importance to their religion, and the fact had been duly impressed on Wilfred since his boyhood. Like some able orators, it might be said of him that he was never so strong as in opposition; but Wilfred now rarely opposed his father openly. He loved him; he respected him; and he pitied his narrow-mindedness. Discussion was worse than useless with a man of Lord Athelstone's stamp; therefore his son would avoid discussion, avoid angering the old gentleman, whose health had been a good deal shaken during the last two years. Only a passion which over-bore every filial consideration would drive Wilfred to commit an act which would be a virtual separation

from the parents whom, with all his wilfulness, he loved well.

Under these circumstances he resented—and all the more, perhaps, that he felt he had no right to resent—the intrusion of this detestable cousin upon pleasure grounds which Wilfred had marked for his own. He brooded over it all the evening, while apparently absorbed in the “Earthly Paradise,” which had just been published. At one time he resolved to relinquish his plan of waylaying Nellie when she left his mother the following morning. He would never seek out the girl again, never hold other than the most casual intercourse with her. But such resolves, wise though they might be, were only bred of irritation and disgust. When eleven o’clock struck next day, it found him on a bench in the maple-wood through which the girl must pass on her way back to the village. He had seen her shown into Lady Athelstone’s boudoir a few minutes before.

The interview was soon over. When Lady Athelstone had questioned the young pupil-

teacher relative to some children in whom she was interested, she said,

“Gossip travels quickly. My maid told me just now that you were thought to be engaged to a cousin of yours, who is come here from Warmington to see you. Is it true?”

Nellie flushed scarlet.

“No, my lady, certainly not.”

“Oh, really? Well, I was in hopes—not but that you are very young. . . Still”

“Indeed, my lady, I have never thought of such a thing. . . and I wouldn’t marry my cousin on any account.”

“Indeed? . . . Well, I daresay some worthy young man by-and-by . . . I believe you to be a very good girl, and we are quite pleased with you in the school. . . You can go now. Good morning.”

With these disjointed sentences, after her peculiar fashion, the patroness dismissed the dependant; and Nellie, thankful to escape, crossed the garden rapidly, and entered the maple-wood. A few yards in, the path was intersected by one running at right angles.

She turned to the left, and immediately perceived Wilfred on the bench at some distance off. She would have given worlds to retrace her steps. Though only to look upon him now was a joy to the poor child, which all the schooling of her rebel heart could not repress, she shrank from encountering him at this moment. She felt afraid of herself. How he would despise her, if she betrayed, by any weakness, that all his kindness to her had been misunderstood, and that the interest he had shown in her must be evinced no longer!

She had no choice, however, but to go forward with slow and rather uncertain footsteps, until she approached him, when he rose.

“You look a little pale, Nellie,” he said, kindly. “You had better sit down here for a few minutes. . . Are you not well?”

“I have not been very strong lately, sir.”

“You are over-worked in the school. I told you you were not fit for it.”

“Indeed, I’m not over-worked, sir. . . Mother thinks it’s the weather.”

“Well, at all events, you won’t be over-

worked much longer. I hear you are to be married."

"It is not true . . . not a word of it."

"It seems to be the talk of the village. That very smart young man who is staying at the 'Hen and Chickens' gives it to be understood, I hear."

"If I thought it, I'd never speak to him again," cried Nellie. "But Sam would never be so base. I'll not believe it, sir."

"You allow him to live on hope, perhaps?"

"Mr. Wilfred, indeed I don't . . . please don't say that."

"Why do you walk with him, then?"

"How could I refuse, when he is come all this way to see us, sir, and——"

"And to ask you to marry him, no doubt."

"After all Uncle Joshua has done for me, I——" here she burst into tears.

"Don't cry. I didn't mean to make you cry. Only, do you remember what I said to you the last time we met? I felt inclined to punch your cousin's head yesterday. He looked as if he *only* had a right to be with you,

and I was an intruder. After all, I am an older friend than he is, ain't I?"

She wiped away her tears, and murmured, "Yes, sir."

"And you like me better? Say that you like me better, Nellie."

She did not dare lift up her eyes.

"Oh, sir," she stammered, "it is so—so different, you know, the respect——"

"Hang the respect. I want *liking*. I want you to say you like me better than that cad."

What could she say? She could not lie to him. She almost imperceptibly nodded her head. It was enough for Wilfred.

"Now promise me that you'll walk no more with him, and that you will walk sometimes with me."

"No; I can't promise that."

"Why not? If you could walk with *him*, why not with me?"

"I can't tell why, sir; there is a difference."

"There are so many things I want to

teach you, Nellie—so much I want to read to you.”

“Oh! dear. How I should like that!” she exclaimed, forgetting herself for a moment.

“You think you *would* like it? I shall bring down some books to-morrow.”

She looked frightened.

“Oh, sir, not to-morrow; because—because——”

“Because this cousin will still be here? and everything must give way to him!”

“Sam is so passionate! He will only be here a day or two. Please don’t come, sir, till he’s gone.”

She put her hands together, and looked up with that sweet, child-like expression which Wilfred found so bewitching. He bent his face till it almost touched her.

“Tell me,” he said, “are you afraid for Sam or for *me*?”

“For you,”—the words escaped her involuntarily.

The next instant he had clasped her in his arms. She rose, trembling in every limb, and

tried to walk away; but her head swam round; she staggered, and fell fainting on the path. Wilfred, much alarmed, lifted her up, and laid her gently on the bench.

“My darling, look up! I am so grieved. What a brute I was! Nellie. Speak to me! Say you forgive me!”—but her eyes remained closed, and, though not insensible, she could not speak. He bethought him of a stream not far off, and dashed through the trees to fetch some water. As he did so, a rustling among the boughs and leaves a few yards off attracted his attention for a moment. Could he be watched? He looked round, but saw nothing; and his anxiety about Nellie absorbed every thought. He ran on, and brought back some water in his hat. He bathed her face, and in a few minutes she sat up, pale, indeed, but declaring that she felt able to walk.

“Wait here till I run home and fetch you some wine in my flask.”

She said nothing; she let him go. Then, as soon as he was out of sight, she rose resolutely, and walked as fast as she was able, poor child, through the wood towards Ripple.

When Wilfred returned to the spot a few minutes later, he found to his disgust that she was fled. He meditated pursuing her, when he heard a step among the dead leaves close by, and, turning round, Sam Dawson stood before him.

CHAPTER IX.

THE young shopkeeper's face was white, and his lips tight-clenched. He grasped an oak stick in his hand, and his demeanour, in the intensity of passion, lost much of its vulgar assumption.

“May I inquire what you want here? These grounds are private.”

It was Wilfred who spoke first, and with a calmness which, to say the truth, he was far from feeling. This fellow's intrusion was insolent, and irritating in the extreme. What if he had been playing the eavesdropper?

“*You* know well enough why I'm 'ere. I'm Nell Dawson's cousin, and I mean to be 'er 'usband,” replied Sam, between his teeth.

“I doubt that. Did you overhear our conversation? If so, you must have been gratified.”

“I didn’t ’ear a word—but *I saw*. That was enough. If you think I’m going to stand your ’umbugging her—if you think I’m going to take your leavings, you’re d——ly mistaken.”

“I think nothing of the kind. In the first place, Nellie Dawson will never be your wife—she told me so.” Sam ground his teeth; but Wilfred continued, and the words that fell from him were certainly not those he would have used an hour before—“I am ready to account for my conduct to her mother, but certainly not to you.”

Sam looked at him in silence for a moment, and something like a demoniacal smile crossed his lips.

“’Ow if I tell all over the village what I’ve seen? You’ll like that, won’t you?”

Wilfred inwardly winced; but he was not going to allow this blackguard to see the advantage he had over him.

“It is just what I should expect from you,”

he replied. "A fine, manly action, certainly, to come down here and try to ruin your cousin's reputation by spreading a groundless scandal."

"Groundless? Come, I like that!"

"Yes, groundless. I have known her since she was a little child. No one who had not a black imagination would fancy that I meant to harm her."

"'Arm her? You don't mean to *marry* her, I suppose? That's about it. It's 'arm enough, if you turn the girl's 'ead, and make 'er unfit for 'er station, and then walk away, and leave 'er! But I tell you what it is," he continued, raising his voice, and thrusting his clenched fist almost in Wilfred's face, "I'm not to be put off with your 'igh and mighty airs. I'm not a fool. I know what sort *you* are. And I tell you, if you seduce that girl, *I'll have your blood*—I will, if I swing for it!"

With that he turned upon his heel and strode away.

Wilfred had a certain sense of being worsted, a certain sense of humiliation, which he could

not account for. He had explained nothing; he had promised nothing; he had given this insolent fellow no pledge of any kind; and yet he felt somehow as if Sam had gone away victorious from the encounter. The whole thing was vexatious beyond measure. The incidents of the morning had inflamed his passion four-fold. Nellie loved him; there could be no doubt about it. Her modest reluctance to avow that love only enhanced its value in his eyes. To abandon the treasure which he had won, on account of any paltry obstacle which the world or its laws of convention might set between them, he began to say to himself, would be miserable weakness. But what course was he to adopt? This troublesome brute's interference had complicated matters, and rendered it essential that Wilfred should take a decided line. After some deliberation he resolved to call on Mrs. Dawson that afternoon.

He found her alone. Nellie, on seeing him come up the garden, had fled to her own room. The widow's demeanour was civil and respectful as usual, but there was a certain constraint

in her manner that did not escape Wilfred. He learnt, much to his surprise and satisfaction, when he made a casual remark about her nephew, that the young man had left Ripple by that afternoon's train. Wilfred's curiosity could not be restrained.

"Why did he go so suddenly?" he asked.

Mrs. Dawson hesitated a moment.

"He wanted Nellie to say she'd marry him, for one thing, sir."

"And she refused?"

"Yes, Mr. Wilfred, and then him and me had words."

"I can guess what about. It was about me, now; wasn't it, Mrs. Dawson?"

"It was, Mr. Wilfred. He spoke shameful, and I told him he should never come inside my doors again. I know you're an honourable gentleman as would never lead my girl astray, and I know what he said was all malice, because she won't have him. But at the same time, Mr. Wilfred, I've had it in my mind I ought to speak to you, and I will. You mustn't meet Nellie in the wood, sir. We're

poor people, and our characters is all as we have to look to—we can't make light of what folks say, as the rich can, when they knows they're doing nothin' wrong. Therefore, Mr. Wilfred—I'm sure as you mean too kindly by my girl to wish to injure her—you must not meet her alone, else evil tongues, besides Sam's, 'll be set waggin'."

"I may come here?" said Wilfred, quite humbly. "You will let me bring her books, and read to her here, Mrs. Dawson?"

The good woman looked puzzled. She could not conceive that there could be anything wrong in this, yet instinct told her it was one of those innocent things that are better avoided.

"If you lend her books, Mr. Wilfred, I'm sure as Nellie 'll be grateful. And if you drop in promiscuous now and then, as you've often done since you was a boy, Mr. Wilfred, folks can't say nothin'. But I think you'd better not come too often."

Wilfred sighed, and stroked the cat, who had jumped upon his knee, and mused.

“I know I wish I and the few people I care for in the world were living in a desert island, where there was no such thing as ‘propriety,’ and all did as they liked.”

“Lor! Mr. Wilfred, that’d be a pretty state of things! No, depend on ’t, sir, we’re better as we are. You’ll think so some day. When I’ve bin in trouble, and the Lord’s bin good to me, and delivered me out of it, I’ve thought to myself that all the contrairies was perhaps just put here to bring out the good. If we had all we want there’d be no need o’ patience and sacrifice and kindness, and a lot o’ things as is drawn out of us like.”

“Exactly so,” said Wilfred, looking up from the cat with a little ironical smile. “If we didn’t require them, there would be no use in worrying ourselves about them. I, for one, should be very glad to dispense with patience and self-sacrifice.”

Mrs. Dawson meditated a moment. Then she said, gravely,

“Perhaps not in others, Mr. Wilfred.”

He laughed.

“You are very hard on me, Mrs. Dawson. I had no idea you were satirical.”

“Does that mean scoffing-like? No, Mr. Wilfred. But you’re young, and haven’t known trouble yet. You’ve had everything pretty much your own way, I take it. It can’t be always so. When sorrows come, you’ll learn the valley o’ those things you want to do without.”

“I have not everything my own way now. I want to educate Nellie. I want to teach her a great many things that will make her wiser and happier; and, because of the world’s mischievous folly, I am not to be allowed. I don’t see the beauty of patience or self-sacrifice here at all.”

“The child will do very well as she is, sir; she has edication enough; don’t think about her. ’Tis only her health troubles me. This last month, I don’t know what ails her, but she is grown as pale and weak as anything, and, though she won’t own it, I know she don’t sleep o’ nights.”

Wilfred looked up anxiously. “Doesn’t she?”

Poor Nellie!" Then he remained silent for a minute. It was just a month since Trinity Sunday. Could *he* be the cause of her illness? Was it the struggle to repress her love for him that had affected her health—was, perhaps, endangering her life? "Has she seen the doctor?" he asked, presently.

"No, I can't get her to see him. She says there's nothing the matter with her."

"But she *must* see him; I insist upon it. I shall make my mother come and talk to her. It's nonsense going on like this. She has no cough? no pain?"

"No; it seems a kind o' wasting like, and her sperits is quite changed; but she don't complain o' nothin', and so she may get strong again, I hope, when the warm weather is past. It was terrible hot last week."

"She must see the doctor at once. Whatever is the cause, she ought to have advice. My mother shall send him here." He sprang up. "Tell her what I say; and now, good-bye, Mrs. Dawson."

Lady Athelstone, obedient to her son's com-

mands, sent a message to the village apothecary, desiring him to call and examine Nellie Dawson, and report to Lady Athelstone what his opinion was as to the girl's condition.

But before Mr. Dole had gone his round the following morning, he was sent for post haste to the Castle. The messenger informed him that his lordship had had a fit in his dressing-room; that he was insensible, and that her ladyship was greatly alarmed.

CHAPTER X.

THE post arrived daily at the Castle between seven and eight o'clock, and it was one of Lord Athelstone's peculiarities that no one should open the bag but himself. It was brought him, with his hot water ; he unlocked it, took out his own letters, and gave back the others to his valet for distribution.

On the morning in question he rose, not feeling very well. The bag was laid, as usual, on his table. There were four letters for him. One, which he had been expecting, from his lawyer ; two from friends upon business connected with the approaching Borough election ; and one in a handwriting which, from its copy-book flourishes, he concluded was a trades-

man's. This he laid aside, while he digested the contents of the others.

So the purchase of that farm was effected, and his man of business wrote that he was satisfied that the transaction was an advantageous one to my lord. He was much pleased at this, and thought over it a good deal while he was shaving. The next two letters gave him much food for reflection, and of a less pleasant kind. His correspondents wrote very much to the same effect; that if, at the approaching election, the Honourable Wilfred Athelstone would come forward upon Conservative principles, his return for the Borough could be almost ensured. If it could be ascertained beyond doubt that the young man was guided, in his political views, by his father, Lord Athelstone's name would be sufficient guarantee for his son. Indeed, even as a moderate Liberal, though there might be a contest, his chances of election were very good. But a rumour had got abroad of his holding very extreme *Radical* opinions. Should this rumour be unhappily verified, the writers both stated plainly

enough that they must decline to support him.

Lord Athelstone could not but approve their decision. In their place he would do likewise. Then came the question, could any arguments, any persuasion of his, induce Wilfred to modify, if not his present convictions, at least such expression of them as must alienate the suffrages of the main body of electors? Lord Athelstone's good sense, which seldom permitted him to indulge in delusions, constrained him to negative this. His son had become much more docile in discussion of late; he was affectionate to his father, and that he possessed good abilities of a certain kind was unquestioned. He was spoken of as a young man who might do almost anything, "if he liked." Unfortunately, he did not like, apparently, to work in the particular groove which alone could bring solid distinction, and give him a claim to personal consideration in the county—for what was a prize for poetry, or any such rubbish, worth? Then the boy's opinions on most subjects at present were altogether pernicious. He hoped, he believed, they would

change, as Wilfred grew older; but it must be a work of time; he was not deceived by his son's reticence, he knew full well that there were rocks of obstinacy beneath the fluid amiability of Wilfred's home-relations which nothing would remove. It was hopeless to expect from him at present any renunciation of opinions, which he held none the less that he was silent concerning them when at home.

It was annoying, it was even irritating, for Lord Athelstone wished, above all things, that his son should have some experience of parliamentary life before the time came that he should be called to the Upper House. And who could tell how soon that might be? Lord Athelstone was scarcely a very old man; he was not fanciful or nervous about his own health. But he had had two warnings in the course of the past twelve months which were not to be disregarded; he knew he might die any day. Was his son fit for the responsibilities that would devolve upon him? Was he not rather, in spite of his cleverness and amiability,

lamentably ill-calculated to fulfil his duties as a peer, a prominent and influential man in the county, a landlord whose wisdom or unwisdom would leaven the opinions of large masses in his neighbourhood?

Lord Athelstone said to himself, with a sigh, that it was so. He had sat down a few minutes before, feeling a little giddy; and there he was, leaning back, half dressed, in his arm-chair, with his correspondence lying on the table before him. The tradesman's letter was as yet unread, and at last, after a long interval, he listlessly opened the envelope. The writing was clear enough, in spite of its flourishes, yet it was some minutes before he could grasp the meaning of what he read.

“MY LORD,

“I was witness of a scene to-day in your wood, which makes me write this letter, as I think you should be informed of the blackguard conduct of your son towards the pupil-teacher in your parish school, Miss Nellie Dawson. He is using all his arts to seduce the

girl, and she is so infatuated about him that there is little doubt he will succeed, if you do not prevent it. You can separate them fast enough, if you choose. If you do not, I can tell you that you and yours shall hear of it. And what is more, besides the scandal, my lord, I have took an oath. If that girl, who is my cousin, is seduced, I will shoot your son, like a dog. So I warn you plainly.

“Your lordship’s obediently,

“SAMUEL DAWSON.”

* * * * *

What happened, after Lord Athelstone had mastered the contents of this letter, was never known. His servant heard a noise, and, entering the room, found his master in a fit upon the floor. No one connected the attack with any sudden emotion occasioned by his letters that morning. They were swept hurriedly into a drawer, unread by anyone, and it was only long, long afterwards that Sam’s effusion fell under Wilfred’s eye.

The village doctor, when summoned, did not

seem gravely alarmed. It was a slight apoplectic seizure, similar to one his lordship had had early in the year, and the usual course of remedies were administered. Lady Athelstone, however, wished for further advice, and a physician from London was telegraphed for, and arrived that evening. Absolute quiet, freedom from excitement, from thoughts of any kind, if possible, was the prescription this authority chiefly insisted on, and had eighty guineas for doing so.

The enforcement of this during the next few days was not difficult; for Lord Athelstone lay in a sort of lethargy from which it was almost impossible to rouse him, even to take nourishment. Wilfred was unremitting in his attention to his father, and Lady Athelstone never left the room but to take necessary rest. On the fourth day there seemed a decided change for the better, and the doctor, when he came, was surprised at the improvement. He persuaded Lady Athelstone that she ought to take a drive; she was beginning to suffer from her constant presence in the sick-room, and the

absence of fresh air. Wilfred accompanied the doctor into the hall, and then said,

“By the by, in all our anxiety here, it has escaped my mother to ask if you have been to see the Dawsons. What do you think of the girl?”

“Has been a little over-worked, I suspect, just when she was growing. Tells me she has a holiday now for three weeks. Wants rest, and plenty of good nourishment.”

When his mother was going out that afternoon, Wilfred, after repeating the doctor's words, continued—

“Why not invite her up here, mother, where she would be very useful to you just now in a thousand ways, and where she would be better fed than she is at home? The change would be much the best thing for the poor child, I feel sure.”

Lady Athelstone demurred a little. Was it advisable? She was not sure. Would it be taken “as a precedent?” Her son asked, “A precedent for *what*?” To which her reply was not very lucid. Finally, she shifted the respon-

sibility of decision upon her maid, of whose disapproval touching all matters that concerned "the household" she lived in great awe. Nellie happened to be a favourite with this functionary, and she consequently accorded her sanction to the scheme. Then Lady Athelstone went on her way, and graciously intimated to Mrs. Dawson that, as a little change might do Nellie good, she was to come up to the Castle for a few days. The good mother was touched at her ladyship's kindness, which she believed to be spontaneous, and glad, in her unselfishness, that the child should leave her for awhile, fare sumptuously, and rest from even the small labours of the cottage. To her surprise, the girl seemed to shrink from going. Mrs. Dawson could only attribute her reluctance to shyness, which the mother sought to overcome by all those sensible arguments which are so entirely powerless to affect our inclinations. Nellie's, it is true, would have led her too joyfully to where she should see *him*, hear him speak, feel under the constant influence of his presence, were it not for the instinct of self-mistrust which shook

her heart with fear. She had prayed, poor child, to be delivered from this peril, and lo! the net was closing round her, and she saw no escape.

Between her and her mother there existed the tenderest affection; but the girl's superior education had placed her stand-point of observation and reflection at a distance from Mrs. Dawson's, so that the intimacy which grows with years, from an interchange of thought, unchecked by any sense of inequality between friends, could not subsist. Mrs. Dawson's nature was loving and upright; she was, moreover, by no means a stupid woman. But she had been used all her life to view things directly before her in the straightforward line of sight; wearing blinkers, so to speak, which prevented any side-glance at disturbing objects. That Nellie should have permitted her gratitude and her admiration to deepen into a passionate attachment for one immeasurably above her in station would have seemed to Mrs. Dawson not only gravely reprehensible, but as almost beyond the pale of belief. Still less would she

have been able to understand the conflict going on in her daughter's mind, the struggle to fight or to flee, the weak yielding, the terror, the remorse. Her calmer nature could so little understand a temperament opposed to her own that any other course than the plain one indicated by duty, of doing or of leaving undone, would have appeared impossible to her, and would have met with little sympathy. And Nellie knew this. Also, it is not impossible that, in some vague and far off way, Mrs. Dawson was conscious of a chasm between her dear young daughter and herself, which it did not lie in the power of either to bridge over.

Therefore Nellie now, in her dire necessity, could not bring herself to open her heart to her mother. The girl knew she had better not go and be an inmate of *his* home; but to tell her mother why was impossible. Do not be too hard on her; she was but sixteen.

That evening she and her little box went up to the Castle.

CHAPTER XI.

SOME days elapsed, and Lord Athelstone in many respects seemed better. His mind, though it was far from having regained its vigour, was much clearer in its apprehension of surrounding objects; his powers of speech returned, though he used them but sparingly; and he still kept his bed, declaring that he felt quite incapable of rising.

Wilfred's close attendance upon his father had necessarily relaxed with the amendment in Lord Athelstone's health. Indeed, Lady Athelstone herself was less constantly in the sick-room; she read the papers to my lord in the morning, and wrote most of her correspondence by his bed-side; but in the afternoon she went out daily.

Wilfred had been in the habit of never leaving his own "den," as he called it, till luncheon. That habit, being broken in upon by Lord Athelstone's illness, had not been resumed. It seemed very natural that he should sit in his mother's boudoir, which was close to the sick-room, and that he should ask her to allow Nellie Dawson to come there of a morning, and make herself useful by copying some of his almost illegible MSS. under his personal supervision. The girl wrote such a clear hand, and she was so intelligent, it would immensely forward the completion of his volume, if he used her as an amanuensis. Lady Athelstone was delighted with the idea. She left them to go to her lord, and, when she returned to her boudoir, she always found the pale, modest girl seated on one side of the table, writing, and Wilfred on the other, apparently absorbed in the arrangement of the blotted sheets which were littered about.

Between father and son, no word had passed as to the subject of Sam's letter. Whether the recollection of it had been partially effaced

from Lord Athelstone's mind, until subsequent events brought it back, or whether he waited for renewed strength to speak to his son, matters little. He said nothing; and, though his eyes watched Wilfred with perhaps greater scrutiny than before his illness, this was the only change apparent.

He was not aware of Nellie Dawson's proximity, for nothing had led his wife to name a circumstance so little likely to interest him, as she believed. And the pupil-teacher's visit at the Castle might have remained a mystery to the sick man for some time, but for a circumstance which happened about a week after her arrival.

Wilfred had gone to the neighbouring town on business, and Lady Athelstone debated in her mind whether she, too, might leave her sick lord to attend a Dorcas Society, of which she was president, and whose accounts were in a hopeless state of muddle. The invalid had told her repeatedly to-day—and the last time with some irritation—that he did not want her to stay with him. Lady Athelstone wished

some one would decide whether she ought to obey him or not. Perhaps he was better alone? But then, there was the reading? He certainly could not read to himself; and he still took an interest in the papers. A brilliant idea struck her, and she hurried to his room.

“I was thinking of going in to the Dorcas Society?” she began, in an interrogatory tone.

“Well, go—go by all means.”

“But I do not like leaving you quite alone. I was thinking, if you did not object, of asking Nellie Dawson to——”

“*Who?*” almost shouted Lord Athelstone.

“Nellie Dawson. She has not been well, poor girl, and I have had her up here for change of air. She reads very well, and if you will allow her——”

Lord Athelstone was sitting up in his bed, having raised himself by a sudden effort, and was staring at his wife, while every vein in his forehead was swollen, and his face was almost purple with excitement.

“How long has she been here?” he interrupted her to ask.

“A week.”

“And was this your idea—to ask the girl—or did—Wilfred suggest it?”

“Well, Wilfred certainly suggested it, because the doctor said——”

“That’s enough. That’s all I wanted to know. Good God! It is true, then! And you have been playing into this wretched boy’s hands! He must go at once. He shall go this very day!”

“Go? My dear! go where? What *do* you mean? Surely you don’t suppose for an instant that Wilfred, so good, so high-minded——”

“I don’t suppose—I *know*,” cried Lord Athelstone. “If it had not been for my illness, which seems to have prevented my thinking of anything, I should have sent him away long ago. He shan’t stay another day here—and the girl—the girl must return home at once. Do you hear? *At once*. See that she is gone before he comes in, and I’ll pack him off to London to-night. I tell you, Jane, if they meet again, God knows what may come of it.”

Had a thunderbolt fallen, Lady Athelstone

could hardly have been more alarmed. In the first place, her husband's excitement was very prejudicial to his health, she well knew; and then she asked herself, had he taken leave of his senses? What could this dreadful suspicion of dear Wilfred mean? Banish him? Banish his only child now that he, the father, was so ill? Impossible. She was at her wits' end. She stood irresolute at the foot of the bed, saying—

“My dear, pray calm yourself. This idea of yours, I assure you, is quite . . . quite——”

“Never mind what it is,” said her lord, in the same excited tone—“see that my orders are obeyed, Jane. Go. Don't stand there—go at once, and send Wilfred to me immediately he returns. Stay”—and he rang the bell violently,—“I will send orders to the stables.”

Then Lady Athelstone saw that nothing was to be done. She went out, and told Nellie to put up her little box, and walk down to her mother's cottage at once.

“My lord is in a very strange state,” she said, thinking it necessary to account for the girl's

sudden dismissal. "I suppose it is the idea of anyone being here which irritates him. I am sorry to send you away, but there is no help for it."

Nellie felt a great pang at leaving the Castle. How happily those days had sped! There had never been any like them in her life before; nor could there ever be again, she said. If she should pass the remainder of her existence in a routine of drudgery, she had at least these blissful hours to look back to; nothing could rob her of them. He had bent down from his high estate to her, as she had read of the fabled sun-god stooping to a humble flower; and though it was but a ray, perhaps, in passing, though he should go on his course through the heavens, and forget her, and the glory he had shed on her, the memory of that noontide hour would be a joy to her through life. A romantic little girl, this, with all the unwisdom that belongs to sixteen, but very pure at heart. No vain or ambitious fancies troubled her love. She did not expect, nay, she did not even hope for, anything beyond the pride and happiness

of these few days, and she could kneel down beside her little bed that night and thank her Heavenly Father for His goodness to her, adding, with all the fervour of her soul, a prayer that Wilfred Athelstone might be guided and strengthened in his onward course.

Lady Athelstone, meantime, returned to her lord's room, and was alarmed at the condition in which she found him. His excitement had been followed by complete prostration. After giving his valet orders that Wilfred should be sent to his father immediately the dog-cart returned, Lord Athelstone had fallen back upon his pillows, and seemed incapable of even opening his eyes. The doctor was at once sent for; but he was out, and had not arrived at the Castle when Wilfred returned home. He ran up at once to the sick-room, and found his mother greatly agitated. Why did the doctor not come? What was to be done? The stimulants seemed to produce little effect. Wilfred sat down by the bed-side, and took his father's hand. Lord Athelstone was apparently unconscious of his son's presence. He

breathed heavily ; but did not move for nearly an hour. Then he opened his eyes, and they fell upon Wilfred, and gradually there kindled a light in them which told of returning memory, force, intelligence. He attempted to sit up.

“You must keep quiet, my dear,” said his wife.

“Leave the room, all of you—except Wilfred,” he replied, in his old peremptory way ; only the voice was weak.

“Just wait, my dear, till the doctor comes,” pleaded Lady Athelstone.

“If I wait, it may be too late. I have strength enough to say what I want now. Go.”

Lady Athelstone saw that further opposition to his will would only excite him ; she left the room.

The old man turned to his son, who still held his hand, and said, slowly,

“You and I have never had a quarrel, Wil. We have not the same opinions, and I’m sorry you hold those you do ; but your conduct—*that* has never given me real uneasiness un-

til now. If what I've heard is true—I hope to God it isn't—you're doing a rascally thing. What's there between you and this Dawson girl?"

Wilfred started, and flushed crimson. He was angry to feel that he did so, and replied, impetuously,

"Nothing, father. I hope no one has been telling you any lies?"

Lord Athelstone, instead of replying, continued, as though his son had not spoken,

"I have always considered the endeavour, on the part of a man in your station, to take advantage of it for the purpose of ruining a girl in humble life, as black an act as a man can commit. A young fellow can't lead the life of a saint. I don't expect it. But this—here in your own village—a girl you've known since she was a child—it's a shame and a disgrace! The anger I felt, when I heard you accused of this was the immediate cause of my attack."

"Good God! Father, who can have poisoned your mind against me? I will give you my

oath that I had sooner cut off my right hand than injure Nellie Dawson. She is as pure as any girl in the land."

"I am glad of it," said Lord Athelstone. One fear was, indeed, set at rest by his son's energetic denial; but the other dread, present in the father's mind, only waxed stronger.—"I am glad of it; but your warmth shows the interest you take in the girl. She has been up here in the house, I find, at your suggestion. What folly! What does it all mean? Do you suppose you can play this sort of game with impunity? It's handling fire, I tell you. You'll turn the child's head, and damage her character, and then—then, with your romantic ideas, I shouldn't wonder if you offered to marry her! Now, mark my words, if you do, she'll be a miserable woman. She may have every virtue under the sun, but you can't make her a lady. She will be looked down upon by your own class, and her life will be a succession of humiliations."

He spoke with great excitement, and the fear of agitating his father caused Wilfred to

reply with more calmness than he might otherwise have done.

“I assure you I entertain no such idea. Pray disabuse your mind on this subject, father. If I have been foolish, I promise you I will give idle tongues no cause to wag about Nellie for the future. I will remember your words.”

The dying man would, perhaps, have done well to leave the matter there. But he could not be satisfied without going a step further.

“Then you will promise me never to marry this girl?”

Wilfred shifted uneasily, though he still held his father's hand. After an instant's pause, he said—

“I have a horror of promises of this nature. I think no man has a right to bind himself in this way. But I will pledge myself to this, father: to avoid the temptation you fear for me as far as possible; not to seek the girl in any way. You believe me?”

“Yes,” said Lord Athelstone, after an inter-

val of at least a minute, during which he arrived at the decision he now pronounced; "and, this being so, there is but one thing to be done. My life may be prolonged for days, or weeks—who knows? I will not have you hanging about here, and *thrown* in the way of the temptation you promise me to avoid. We will take leave of each other now, and you must go away to-night."

"Go away? Leave you, father, *now*?"

"Yes, a little sooner or later—what matter? I cannot last long, and I shall not be easy as long as you remain here, Wil."

The son knelt down and pressed the old man's hand to his lips. His voice was choked as he murmured—

"Let me be with you to the end, father."

"No; you will come back to bury me, and then it is my wish that you take your mother away, and shut up Athelstone. If you mean to work at Oxford, if you mean to go in for honours, return there. If not, you had better cut the place. It has done you no good. You had better go abroad with your mother. On

your return in the spring, you will take your seat, and, I hope, change your politics; and I hope, too, that you will marry early—a girl in your own position. That's all I have to say. And now, God bless you!"

His voice was growing weak with much talking, and Wilfred saw that further opposition to his father's wishes was impossible. He had no choice but to obey, and to master his emotion at this trying juncture, as far as it was possible to do so.

Lord Athelstone, like most Englishmen, had seldom in his life, when deeply moved, shown what he felt; and now, upon the threshold of the grave, he was beyond such displays.

Wilfred kissed his father's brow, and their eyes met in one long look which Wilfred never forgot. Then the dying man nodded his head once, and Wilfred, taking this as a signal for his dismissal, hurried from the room with a bursting heart.

He found his mother anxiously awaiting him.

"Well, my dear, what is it?"

He leant his head between his hands upon the mantelpiece, and jerked out—

“You are to go to him. He has bid me good-bye. He says I am not to stay. What shall I do?”

“Do as he desires you,” she replied, quickly. It was, perhaps, the only instance on record of Lady Athelstone’s answering so decidedly. “Your conscience would not feel easy, my dear, if you disobeyed his last commands; and—besides that, he would probably find it out if you stayed, and be very angry. Go to Oxford; you can be with me in a couple of hours if I telegraph for you.”

For some time after Lady Athelstone entered her husband’s room he did not speak. She sat down by the bedside, and he looked at her; but either he was weighing what he should say, or was too much exhausted by his conversation with his son to utter. At last the wife was startled by these few words, enounced with a feeble voice, but most distinctly—

“Pack them off, mother and daughter, to Australia—if you can.”

Lady Athelstone could be at no loss as to whom he meant; but she was much distressed and perplexed. What strange persistence in a crotchet! Come what might of it, however, this was no moment for argument; she must humour him.

“Of course, my dear, if you wish it.”

“I’ll make a provision for them in that case. If they won’t go, you must get the girl placed as nursery-governess somewhere. You can manage that—eh? and the further off the better. As long as she is here, keep Wil away.”

Lord Athelstone’s only son left home that same evening, and the fact naturally gave rise to much comment and conjecture. An attorney from — arrived at the Castle, in compliance with his lordship’s instructions, and certain codicils were added to his will, which will be named by-and-by.

Three days later, Thomas, ninth Baron Athelstone, departed this life in the seventieth year of his age.

CHAPTER XII.

DURING his last hours, the old lord had mapped out, prospectively, his widow's course of action with great completeness ; and, in tracing her conduct, it will be understood that she faithfully adhered to his instructions, though the sharp and decisive lines of the original plan were a little blurred in passing through her hands. But for this, however, her judgment could hardly have supported the strain of regulating independent actions without reference to her son. Happily, he accepted with perfect docility all she proposed, as being the last wishes of his father. Athelstone was to be shut up ; and immediately after the funeral—it was then the beginning of Septem-

ber—they would start for the continent, and pass the winter in Italy. If disposed to return to Oxford and work for honours, in the spring, he could do so.

He felt that this was the wisest plan, all things considered. It was incumbent on him to leave Athelstone, which was now full of sad associations, not unmixed with self-reproach. Though his father's fears had gone far in advance of the truth, there was no escape from the conviction that the interest Wilfred had shown in Nellie had occasioned comment that might damage her, and that the discovery of this had so agitated his father that it might be said to be the remote cause of his death. The old man's words rang in his son's ears; and Wilfred resolved that, suffer as he might, he would be better than his promise, and resolutely avoid Nellie, if chance brought them together. Absence was the only remedy for the evil he had wrought. He did not believe, as regarded her, that the mischief could be lasting. As for himself, he would not, in his present condition, attempt to analyse his

feelings. He had loved his upright, unvaryingly kind old father very truly, and the thought that his last hours had been clouded by disquietude concerning his son, cut the young man to the heart.

It was in this frame of mind that he heard his father's will read aloud, after the funeral, with the codicil, bequeathing five hundred pounds to Mrs. Dawson, if she should desire to emigrate, and a further sum of five hundred pounds to her daughter, on the day of her marriage, provided that such marriage met with Lady Athelstone's approval.

To the trustees, who heard the codicil read, it had no special significance: to Wilfred it naturally had, and, as evidence of the dread which absorbed his father's thoughts at the last, it added a stone to the cairn which had accumulated on the young man's heart. The thought that he was now absolute lord over lands producing a clear rental of fourteen thousand a year was far from being a consolation, as it would have been to many. He cared nothing for money; he hated trouble in any

direction where daring individuality was cramped. No original system of administering an estate having occurred to him, he regarded the responsibilities that now devolved upon the possessor of the Barony of Athelstone with little short of dread. And this reluctance to assume responsibilities being the temper of his mind at the moment was another reason why he hailed with satisfaction a lengthened absence from home.

Lady Athelstone had an interview with Mrs. Dawson, whom she sent for, the following day. It was Saturday, and on Monday Wilfred and his mother were to leave the Castle.

This was what passed.

“I sent for you, Mrs. Dawson,” began Lady Athelstone, “instead of communicating the fact through the solicitor, to tell you that my dear lord left you a legacy in his will, under certain conditions.”

“A legacy? O dear me! my lady, I——”

Lady Athelstone raised her hand from her chin.

“Wait a minute. He has left you five

hundred pounds, provided you will emigrate—that is, of course, if you have any *desire* to do so.”

“Any desire to emigrate?” repeated the astounded Mrs. Dawson. “No, my lady, I haven’t none. I’m sure it was most good of my lord to think of me; but what ever should I do a——”

“Wait a minute,” again interrupted Lady Athelstone, and again she raised her hand. “You must hear *all*, and not decide rashly. That is why I wanted to talk the matter over with you. My dear lord was much interested about Nellie.” (This was strictly true, in a certain sense.) “He thought that, with her intelligence and—and good looks, you know, she was likely to make a better marriage in the Colonies than she could expect to make here.” (This, I fear, was *not* strictly true.) “He has left another sum of five hundred pounds for her, if she marries in such a way as I approve of.”

Mrs. Dawson was struck dumb. She did not know if she was in a dream.

“Dear! my lady,” she faltered at last, “I

can scarce believe it—I, who never so much as knew my lord had ever noticed Nellie . . . But as to the emigration, my lady, I haven't no call to reflect, for I couldn't do it. I've lived at Ripple, and I'll die there, please God. Joshua (that's my brother-in-law) wanted me to go and live at Warmington, but I wouldn't, and it would be worse to cross the seas, and go among strange folk. I'm too old for it, my lady. I hope you won't be displeased."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Dawson," replied Lady Athelstone, a little nervously. "It was only for your own good, and your daughter's, my dear lord suggested it. In case you declined, he desired me to try to find her a situation as nursery-governess, which would be an advancement on her present position. You would not object to her leaving you, I suppose?"

"Well, my lady, I did hope to keep her here a bit."

"But for her advancement, you know?"

"Oh! In course, if—if it's for her good, I can't say nothing, my lady; only she is not over-strong, you see."

“That is just it. She wants the best nourishment, and light work. This school-teaching is too much for her.”

“Very well, my lady—anything but to emigrate; not that.”

Lady Athelstone looked abstractedly at a paper-weight on the table before her, and mechanically moved it. Then she moved it back to its original position. Had she done all that was demanded of her? Had she failed in carrying out her lord's instructions to the letter? No; if she had not pleaded the cause of emigration with the earnestness which a conviction of its importance in this case could alone have given her, she had repeated what she had been told to say, and it only remained for her now to write certain letters in the girl's behalf. Her conscience would then be clear.

“I am going abroad with my son,” she said, looking up, after a pause, “and we shall be absent all the winter. I will write to some institutions and offices for the employment of young women where I am well-known; and, if Nellie has any applications during my absence,

the ladies can be referred to me, and to the schoolmistress. Now, I will detain you no longer, Mrs. Dawson, for I have a great deal to do; but I made a point of seeing you myself; and remember that, if at any time you change your mind about emigrating, it will be a pleasure to me to carry out my lord's views."

"I haven't words, my lady, to thank you enough for all your kindness," said Mrs. Dawson, in a tremulous voice, "nor yet to say, what I hope you won't take it as a liberty, my lady, how I feel for you in your trouble, which I've known the like myself. May God support you, my lady, under your loss. We know it's our own loss, too, for there wasn't a better landlord in all the country-side, though I make no doubt that Master Wilfred—that is, my lord—will follow in his father's steps, and be a blessing and a comfort to you, my lady, and an honour to his name."

What comes from the heart goes to the heart, if there be a heart to reach. Lady Athelstone had not shed many tears since her husband's death, which his long illness had so prepared

her to expect that it was no shock when it came ; and, not being of an emotional nature, her feelings did not seek the relief which many demand. But she had a heart, and she did feel more deeply than anyone guessed, except her son, the severance of a companionship which had never faltered in faithfulness for five and twenty years. There had been nothing of romance in their early attachment, nor was there that close communion of souls in later times which is like a glimpse of heaven given to certain married lives. But they had suited each other very well, for all that ; and Lady Athelstone knew, with an instinct in advance of her mental acuteness, that, in spite of the affection which subsisted between herself and her son, he would never open his heart unreservedly to her, never come to her in trouble or annoyance, as his father had always done. There was something lost from her life which nothing could replace ; and the poor widow's words, in their simplicity, touched a chord which brought tears into the rich one's eyes. She held out her hand.

“Thank you. I shall always remember your sympathy with gratitude, Mrs. Dawson, and shall always befriend Nellie, depend upon that.”

With what startling vividness she remembered those words long afterwards! There are moments in most lives, apparently unimportant, which, for some unexplained cause, remain engraved on the memory. The sweet, refined face of the poor woman, the unspoken trust which shone in her eyes, as they met Lady Athelstone's, were never forgotten by that lady.

The next day was one of heavy showers, alternating with half hours of a brilliant fallacious sunshine. Wilfred attended morning service. He had done so, out of deference to his father's views, during the old lord's life-time; and he would not seize the first opportunity of proclaiming his emancipation from doctrinal restraints. It was a trial; he occupied the big pew alone; he knew that the eyes of the curious were upon it, and he felt as if he were a humbug. The Psalmist, exultant in his own righteousness,

and crying out for the extermination of his enemies, had nothing in common with the young man, nor had the venerable chronicler of the bloody wars of Judah; he wondered why their utterances were read, and of what profit they could ever be to anyone; to him, at this moment, they were so much sound and fury signifying nothing. His thoughts were with the old man who had gone to his rest, doubting nothing, fearing nothing, able blindly to accept all; and Wilfred's heart, as he buried his head in his hands, sighed—

“O, that it were possible
For one short hour to see
The souls we love, that they might tell us
What and where they be!”

Towards five o'clock that day, the sun shone slantwise through the dripping red and yellow leaves for the last time before it sank into the belt of woods westward. Wilfred knew that the afternoon service was over, and that the churchyard was likely to be deserted at this hour. He was minded to look once more on the spot where his father lay, and, as if the

mute, unconscious clay could hear him, to pour out his heart on that spot in bitter self-reproach to the departed shade whom he had vexed so sorely. His mind was in an abnormal condition; neither his remorse nor his grief was altogether natural and healthy. But for him, his father might be alive at this moment. That was the thought that haunted him. He had behaved very wrongly about Nellie; his conduct had been self-indulgent and mischievous, and the first to suffer from it was his upright, sensitively-honourable father. He despised and loathed himself; and perhaps the best thing for the girl was that she should be brought to despise and loathe him too. He would not see her willingly again for years, nor would he write to her. But the reflection that each action we commit carries consequences with it that are interminable and incalculable, forced itself inconveniently upon him. No; the laws of cause and effect were not to be reversed for him, by profession or performance either; the past must, assuredly, bear its fruit

—nay, *had* already borne it in one grievous direction.

With his head buried on his chest, he walked slowly up the churchyard. The place was dark with wide-armed yews and tall black cypresses, which almost completely shut out the glimmering gold of the evening light. Not until he was close upon the ivy-grown balustrade which fenced in the large square family vault did he become conscious of a woman's form, with her back towards him, within the enclosure. She was scattering a few of the last roses of autumn on the fresh-laid stone. At the sound of Wilfred's approaching footstep, she turned quickly round. A chance sunbeam made an aureole of the soft brown hair, and the face beneath looked that of a young saint. It was Nellie.

He stood suddenly still; nay, he drew back; the movement was not to be mistaken.

Pale and hesitating, she advanced towards him. In order to escape from the enclosure, she must pass close to where he stood.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” she began, very gently, “I—I did not know——”

But he had started at the first sound of her voice as if he were stung, and the strange, almost savage air with which he glared at her frightened her so much that she stopped short. For one moment he hesitated; then, with a heavy sigh, and without a word, he turned sharply on his heel, and walked rapidly away.

The girl clung to the railing, and presently her wounded heart found relief in sobs.

“He is offended with me. I have done something wrong. What, oh! what is it? He never treated me so before . . . he was always so kind. Is it because I came here? I thought no one would know it was me, and that he would like to find the flowers when he came. And now he will go away, angry with me, and I shall see him no more!”

He did go away the next day, and she saw him no more. But his anger was directed all against himself, and not against her. It would have consoled the poor child, could she have known it.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN December Wilfred and his mother were at Florence, and there they passed nearly the whole winter. He had never been abroad before, and decided to remain in the Tuscan capital, and see it and the neighbouring cities thoroughly, rather than hurry through, with the great tide of travellers, to Rome and Naples. These should be left for another year, since it was necessary that he should return to England in March, to take his seat in the House of Lords. Under the influence of sunshine, and the novelty and interest of all that surrounded him, the young man's mind soon recovered its tone. The shock of his father's death was passed; the painful impression left on his heart by his parting from Nellie, his self-reproach and regretful

retrospection, grew fainter and fainter as the weeks sped on. Perhaps it would have been unnatural had it been otherwise. He was still very young, and his temperament was one of which the morbidity found a safety-valve in poetry concerning his devastated youth; while its buoyancy asserted itself in the keen pleasure he experienced as he looked up from the banks of the Arno and beheld Giotto's campanile clear cut against the cloudless sky, or down from San Miniato on the city, lying like a jewel in the lap of lilac-tinted hills. His imagination was stirred by those storied walls; his senses were quickened to appreciate the beauty of things he had never before beheld. Art, as Art, he did not understand; but its poetical, imaginative, and historical qualities appealed strongly to him. He stood among the tombs of Santa Croce; he wandered among the cloisters of Santa Maria Novella; and peopled the arcades of the Palazzo Publico with the shadows of the mighty dead.

He only wanted some human sympathy, which he could not look for in his amiable

mother, to be really very happy; and this he found before long. Lady Athelstone took a daily drive on the "Colle," or in the "Cascine," and passed the rest of the day immersed in correspondence, chiefly on business.

Perhaps the complete change of climate, scene, and association was better for her than seclusion at Athelstone would have been; but it was not within the limit of possibilities that those influences which operated so beneficially upon her son should be felt by her. She remained much depressed; and neither Michael Angelo nor Giotto availed to distract her thoughts. She would like to say all the right things about Florence when she left it; but at present her intercourse with her son was of an affectionate realism, undisturbed by ulterior considerations; the quality of the beef, and the odours of the Hotel d'Arno, being of more interest and moment than the Tomb of the Medici.

An old acquaintance of hers, Lady Bannockburn, with her daughter, Lady Frances Cope, arrived at the same hotel; and Lady Athel-

stone, though she paid no visits, consented to see them. After this, they "dropped in" very often of an evening, and, the first impression of Lady Frances's plainness having worn off, Wilfred found her a most agreeable companion. He escorted them daily to one or other of the palaces or villas, and the acquaintance very rapidly ripened into an intimacy which Lady Bannockburn viewed with great satisfaction.

Lady Frances was short and plain. But she was clever, quick, and humorous; she had read a good deal, had considerable independence of character, and very warm affections. Wilfred had never met a young woman the least like her. She amused—nay, she interested him, in some degree. But his pleasure in her society was chiefly due to the fact that he had found himself appreciated. She argued with him, she contradicted him; but he felt that she understood him. And that her society was congenial he frankly—perhaps too frankly—evinced. His mother only felt a sense of relief that his thoughts had been diverted from the little pupil-teacher. She attached no great import-

ance to the flirtation, if flirtation it was; but Lady Frances had a considerable fortune, and, regarded in every respect, she was—except the mere shell—a desirable young person for Lord Athelstone to marry. His mother was in no hurry for this event; and more brilliant daughters-in-law were, no doubt, waiting ready to accept her peerless Wilfred when the moment arrived for him to renounce his independence. But he might do worse than marry Lady Frances Cope; and Lady Athelstone felt that, for the time being, at any rate, this friendship was a benefit to her son.

How the young lady viewed it will best be shown by some passages from letters to her great friend, Miss Sylvia Brabazon, at Naples; to whom the reader will be introduced later. The first of these ran as follows:—

“I wish I could describe Lord Athelstone to you, dear Sylvia. He is a hero, begun with the finest intentions by a sculptor who had not quite enough marble to finish him. He is too short (being a dwarf myself, I like tall men, of course); but he has a handsome head, with a

very intellectual and speaking countenance, the expression of which, unless he is bored, is singularly agreeable. He has a charming voice and manner, and there is something about him quite unlike the ordinary young men one meets. He seems to like being with us, and, though we have only known him ten days, we are already almost intimate. You see, Lady Athelstone, being in the first three months of her widowhood, goes nowhere, and her son knew no one, and was quite alone until we came; and, though he *talks* a great deal about liking solitude, he never refuses to join us in our walks and drives, and he certainly seems more cheerful than when we met him—without knowing who he was—looking like Manfred, a prey to gloomy thoughts, the day after our arrival. At first I thought he rather encouraged that resemblance; he seemed made up of ice and thunder; scowled at us in the passage, and bowed in the most freezing manner, without ejaculating a sound, when he was introduced. However, the sun broke through the thunder-cloud at last, and then he did not take long to

melt. I wonder what you would think of him, dear; for I know no one whose opinion I value as I do yours, and I cannot make up my own mind. If he is as charming, on further acquaintance, as he appears at first, you would agree with me there are few men, *out of a book*, to be found like him. His conversation is really delightful; all he says is so fresh and unexpected—sometimes even startling; but I can pardon anything that is original. He is a poet, my dear, and (I imagine, for I have read nothing of his) of the most advanced modern school. Still one cannot listen to him and not feel sure that whatever he does must possess merit, however eccentric it may be. But I must not run on, or you will think . . . I do not know *what* you will think of your faithful and foolish friend, F. C.”

The next extract is from a letter written a fortnight later.

“Lord Athelstone repeated to me some of his poetry yesterday. It is most musical, and delightful to listen to; but I felt a little bewildered; I am not sure that I understood it all.

He has apparently been very unhappy, for a great deal of it is in a most miserable strain. Can it be that, at his age, he has already been disappointed in love? It seems to me impossible that anyone to whom he was attached could remain insensible to his affection. He reminds me of some poet of another age—Ariosto, perhaps. There is a fire and tenderness, a resolute and eloquent obstinacy in his discussions, very unlike the curbed and careful utterances of most of the men I know, who are not fools.

“He is sitting before the fire now, reading ‘Galignani,’ and the lamplight falls upon his head—let me sketch it for you. A massive brow, from which the hair waves backwards in a dark mass; light grey eyes, over which the lids droop languidly, and the black brows close into one straight line above them, when the interest or excitement that kindled their fire dies down; a perfectly cut nose, and delicate little moustache, as yet too slight to veil (as it one day will, no doubt) the only error of this face—a mouth which, I must confess it, is somewhat large and sensual. Except this in-

fantine moustache, there is no hair on his face, and the shape of the chin and jaw, which are firm even to obstinacy, rising from a throat like that of Antinous, is perfectly displayed with the loose open collar which he wears *à la Byron*.

“He is a great worshipper, by the way, of this poet, whom it has been the fashion of late years, he says, to under-rate. He wants me to read everything Byron wrote, and is disgusted with mamma for laying an embargo on ‘Don Juan.’ Thereupon ensued a hot argument between them; mamma maintaining that the knowledge of evil came to us all soon enough, and that the longer a girl could be kept from it the better; Lord Athelstone vehemently declaring that human beings, when they arrived at years of discretion, were meant to *choose* between good and evil, and that it was a very poor compliment to a girl to suppose she could be hurt by ‘Don Juan,’ the many beauties of which would enrapture her, while its immorality would be distasteful. ‘This is no question of a *compliment*,’ mamma replied. ‘It is a question for judgment, founded upon observation. It is

too much the fashion now for young women to read everything. I do not think the tone of their minds is improved; there is no bloom left; nor is there any gain to compensate for this loss.'

"Of course Lord Athelstone did not give in; he never does; but in spite of his great cleverness, and of my desire to believe him right, I think mamma had the best of it."

Again, three weeks later, she wrote as follows:—

"I am miserable and elated by turns, Dearest Heart. Your warning came too late. But of what avail are warnings in such a case? Had I been armed with warnings before we ever met, it would have been the same. God knows whether I am deceived in thinking W. A. cares about me! I only know that, *intentionally or not*, he has won my heart, and that the past six weeks have sped like a dream. Shall I wake and find it so? Alas! I begin to have my fears. Until three nights ago he spent almost every evening with us. His mother never came; sometimes we went to

her ; but she often sent to say she was too tired to receive us, and then Lord A. generally came to our room. For the last three evenings he has not done so. His manner is just as charming to me as ever ; he always delights in what he calls ‘drawing me out ;’ and on Wednesday, when he drove us to the Poggio Imperiale, he was in unusual spirits, and, as I was so too, we talked a great deal of nonsense. He said it was the pleasantest afternoon we had yet passed in Florence. But, though we have seen him since, he pleaded some excuse for not accompanying us, as he had promised to do, to Vinciliata on Friday, and again yesterday. I asked him point-blank where he was going, and he replied, ‘to call on some Italians,’ whose acquaintance he had made at the Pergola on Wednesday night. Mamma said I ought not to have asked him ; but I cannot see the harm, intimate as we have been. Yesterday he brought us a basket of camelias and violets ; but he did not remain ten minutes. As we drove in the Cascine later, we saw him at the door of a carriage drawn up in the square,

after the idiotic fashion of these Florentines, who sit there, day after day, shivering in their open carriages, listening to the compliments or the gossip of the 'golden youth' who crowd round them. What an existence! Is it possible that *he*, with his high aspirations, his poetic mind, should be content to swell such a throng? The lady he was talking to was dark, and looked quite *old*. I was glad to see that."

Yet another ten days, and Miss Brabazon received a sad letter from her friend, out of which we take the following passage, which is the last we shall quote from her correspondence :

"It is all over. Everything is changed now. I can no longer remain under a delusion. We meet daily, sometimes in Lady Athelstone's room, sometimes in the street, or on the stairs ; and he has paid us *two visits*—think of that! When we meet, he always seems desirous, for the moment, to regain the footing from which he has slid voluntarily away ; but it is useless. His voice, his smile, are always the same—always charming ; but there is an effort in his

manner and conversation, which is apparent even to mamma. Poor mamma! She little guesses how deeply I have felt all this, for I have from the first exercised all my powers of repression, seeing how improbable it was that such a man could really care for *me*. When she animadverts severely upon his capriciousness, I try to laugh it off; but every word drives a dagger into my heart.

“And now you will ask, what is the cause of this change? I am told it is the fascination of a certain Madame Uberti’s society—a woman no longer young, nor even *good-looking*, and of very bad reputation, though she still lives with her husband. Is it not dreadful to think that a vile creature like this can attract such a man as Lord Athelstone? I do not understand it—sometimes I refuse to believe it. But there is the fact that every evening now he goes to her box at the opera, and afterwards to smoke in her horrid rooms.

“Mamma is indignant; she says this is the result of reading ‘Don Juan,’ and such literature. It is in vain that I have supplicated her

not to let the smallest difference be apparent in her manner; it is no business of ours what society he keeps; but she is too sincerely interested in him not to let her anger be apparent, and the result, I foresee, will be that he will never come near us. As to Lady Athelstone, who is most amiable, but may be said to be a goose stuffed with *sage* opinions, she says she is 'so glad dear Wilfred has taken to going out a little again, now that it is the fifth month, you know; and it is so nice, he has got into Italian society. Foreign society is such an advantage.' Mamma, to do her justice, never opens her lips to Lady Athelstone on the subject. She says it is better that we should leave Florence. Perhaps she is right. You know we did not originally mean to remain so long; and, though I shall be unhappy wherever I am, elsewhere I should not be subject to the irritation and mortification which I now experience here daily. Though I try to keep up, and make stupid little jokes, and wear a stereotypical grin on my face, I am cut to the heart. I know I shall never care for any other man as

I have done for this one, and I say to myself, 'What a fool you have been to put all your eggs into one basket, and set *that* on the head of a man who capers about the world, and probably makes himself equally charming to every woman he comes near.' Our lot is hard, dear Sylvia. We may sit in the sunshine, and accept the fruit it pleases men to bring us; we must utter no murmur when they ride away in the cool of the evening, and only the stalks and the rind are left us to feed on through the long, long night!"

Poor Lady Frances! Yes, nothing but the stalks and the rind were left you. The apples were green, and would have proved very indigestible for life's sustenance; but they seemed to you delicious in that brief Florence time, which you cannot bear to look back to now.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE lady to whom Athelstone was presented the first evening he set foot within the "Pergola," and who has been named in the foregoing letters as Madame Uberti, was a person of considerable mark in the Florentine world. Lady Frances had said truly she was not very young; but few men (at least, after half an hour's conversation) would have ratified her judgment that the lady was not good-looking. She had beautiful eyes, a profusion of black hair, and a faultless figure. Her features were not regular, certainly; but there was a charm in her smile, and a *bonhomie* in her manner, that were irresistible to many. In fact, she had the attraction that belongs so

peculiarly to her nation, of perfect naturalness, which made it impossible for anyone to feel ill at ease in her company. Her *salon* was very popular in consequence ; and, whatever people might say behind her back, there was no one in Florence whose invitations were more prized.

Madame Uberti was one of those soft, ease-loving natures that like to see everyone around them, including their husbands, happy, and all the wheels of the domestic machinery well-oiled. As neither of this amiable couple had the shadow of a principle, or entertained any jealousy of the other, there was no obstacle to the gratification of their separate inclinations, and they lived most harmoniously, meeting at meals—nay, occasionally driving together, and leading absolutely separate lives. One man after another had his seat, by a well-understood prescriptive right, in Madame Uberti's box, and was to be found, day after day, smoking his cigarette in that lady's blue satin *bergère* by the fire. Then his dominion—sometimes abruptly, sometimes gradually—came to an end, and another reigned in his stead. There

was no violent disseverance ; like over-ripe fruit, they dropped from the bough, and were swept away.

This was just the woman to obtain a brief ascendancy over Wilfred Athelstone at this early stage of his career. She attacked that side of his character which was weak, and, as yet, comparatively untried. The Italian nature, with its frank flattery, its momentary fervours, its self-indulgence, and its amiability, the existence steeped in oblivion of all beyond the present moment, the *sans gêne* of society at the Palazzo Uberti, were new experiences ; and the unknown had always an attraction for him. It was a relaxation, too, after the hard high standard of Lady Bannockburn, and the intellectual *qui vive* on which he had been kept by Lady Frances. No bow can stand too long tension ; and he remembered in those days that the greatest minds had generally found solace in women who were, so to speak, pillows of softness, and not boards of mental resistance. He sank into the blue satin *bergère*, and watched the clouds of smoke curl upwards to the

painted ceiling, while he composed couplet after couplet in praise of Madame Uberti's charms. Her arms, her throat, her chin, the pulsations of her heart, the perfume of her hair, were chronicled in alliterative verse of great ingenuity and uncastigated exuberance. There seemed no reason, indeed, why they ever should stop; for, though the human body would not appear to be an inexhaustible theme, the changes that may be rung upon every portion of it are of endless variety. He thought of Byron at the feet of another fair Florentine; but it did not strike him that Byron's instinct was too fine to destroy the effect of one touch of colour by loading his canvas with all the other tints upon his palette.

I have no wish to linger over this episode in Wilfred's career. It lasted but two months, and then Madame Uberti passes from these pages to be seen no more; while, except for that influence which every action of a man's life has upon his character, Wilfred's intimacy with her brought no consequence, and left but little trace behind.

I could not, however, be altogether silent on the subject, for reasons that will be apparent by-and-by; since the fact was soon known in England to all who were interested in Lord Athelstone's future. It offered some obstruction to the clear caligraphy of eulogium in which the name of a youth so endowed was sure to be inscribed; as an inequality on the surface of a fair sheet of paper makes the pen splutter that would fain glide over it. The pen does glide on again; but the splutter remains.

His mother came to him one morning towards the end of February, and said,

“I think it would be better—I wish, indeed, to return to England now. The wind is getting very cold here—and there are those leases—and then your seat in the House, dear, and altogether I believe it is best.”

“If you feel the wind cold *here*, my dear mother, what will you do in England?”

“Oh! it is not the same thing there, in one's own warm house—and I want to get back to it, dear. There are so many things to arrange—so much I left undone, coming away in that

sad hurry—and, besides, you talk of going to Rome next winter.”

“ Yes ; but Florence is just beginning to be delightful now—in the spring.”

“ Oh ! the heat of the sun here will be very trying soon, and——”

“ Why, just now you complained of the cold wind.”

“ So I do ; but I am sure it would be worse if it were hot. I shall be quite glad to get away from these nasty smells. They are really too dreadful. I feel as if I should have typhoid fever, if we stayed here till it got really warm.”

“ I never heard you complain of them before,” said her son, as he turned away.

The explanation of this sudden desire to quit Florence was not far to seek, though Wilfred did not surmise it.

The Bannockburns had departed that morning, and on the previous evening, in wishing Lady Athelstone good-bye, her friend's reticence, which had been proof against great and increasing irritation all these weeks, partially gave way.

“If you have your son’s real interests at heart, my dear Lady Athelstone, I must warn you that the sooner you can quit Florence the better. If I were not going away myself, for obvious reasons, my tongue would be tied. But I cannot see a young man drifting away to destruction, and not do something—if only for *your* sake—to try to save him!”

“Good gracious! Lady Bannockburn, what do you mean? ‘Drifting away to destruction’? Impossible! Wilfred, I am glad to say, has never had any taste for gambling, or low company, and I am sure a better son——”

“I know *that*,” interrupted Lady Bannockburn, with some sharpness; “and as to low company—no, it would be almost less dangerous if he *were* addicted to it, my dear friend. An entanglement in his own sphere is so much more——”

“An entanglement in his own sphere? Oh! Lady Bannockburn, what *do* you mean? I brought him here on purpose to break off——”

She stopped short, and grew red and white. It was very foolish to allude to Nellie Dawson,

she knew; but she felt so nervous, she hardly was conscious of what she said till the words were beyond recall.

Lady Bannockburn, like a well-bred woman, did not ask for a completion of that sentence. She covered her friend's confusion by replying quietly,

“The very air of this vicious place is poison to a young man. The Italian society he frequents is corrupt—the house he frequents *most* is, I am told, one of the worst. I can say no more. After this, you must be guided by your own judgment as to the length of your stay here.”

Lady Bannockburn was as good as her word; she could not be brought to say more than this, but it was enough for Wilfred's anxious mother. Whether this thing was true or not—true, that is, to its worst extent—it behove her to remove her darling out of temptation's way. Lady Bannockburn, she felt, was sore at the intimacy between him and her daughter having cooled; it was probable that she exaggerated matters; but there was *something*—or, at all events, the

world would suppose there was something ; and, for once, she felt tolerably sure her judgment was not at fault in following the path to which Lady Bannockburn had acted as a finger-post.

Wilfred walked away ; it was a bore to leave Florence just now ; he would like to have remained six weeks, or it may be two months, longer ; to have visited the Villa Uberti up in the Apennines, when its fields were carpeted with April flowers ; to have wandered, and sketched, and written verses under the sweet influences of "climate and the affections," as the lady says in "Lothair." But that the affections were not very strong, not strong enough to resist the strain of so small an exigency as this, might be inferred from the ease with which he decided that it was difficult to let his mother return to England alone, and impossible to urge her remaining abroad, against her inclination.

Could Lady Bannockburn have known that they were not gyves of iron, but ropes of sand, which had bound him, that vigilant and ad-

mirable mother might have been yet further exasperated.

As he walked down the Lung' Arno, meditating how he should break to his fair friend the fact of his approaching departure, he nearly ran against a tall, heavily-built young man, in the unmistakeable shooting-jacket and round hat of the travelling Englishman. Wilfred did not look up; he was mentally rehearsing the scene at the Casa Uberti, when a hand was laid on his shoulder.

“Hallo, Athelstone!”

“Why, St. John, old fellow, where do you come from? How long have you been here?”

“I come straight from England. I only arrived last night.”

“And how long do you stay? Where are you going?”

“I am thinking of going to Corsica in a few days. Will you come?”

“Hm! I don't say no. I must think about it. I should like nothing better than a little tour with you; but there's my mother——”

The young men had not met for some years, and both were changed, but Hubert St. John perhaps the most so, for he was three years Wilfred's senior. The coarse features which, in Eton days, had been characterized by a strength and decision unusual in a boy, were in some measure relieved now by a fair bushy beard. He was unquestionably ugly, and there was little vivacity to redeem the ugliness; but it was an interesting face, for all that. The brow, beneath a shaggy mane of dull brown hair, was corrugated with horizontal lines, and impended somewhat over a nose of that undeterminate shape, which the clever author of "Notes on Noses" designates as *cogitative*. The passion of the wide-spread nostrils, however, belonged more to the man of energy and action, than to the student or philosopher. The eyes were small but clear, and of singular directness in their glance. The habitual expression of the face was one of melancholy; but gleams of humour and sarcasm flashed over it in conversation, and at times a look of infinite tenderness came into the eyes.

Instead of three, there seemed to be thirteen years' difference between the two friends now; life's stream having carried the one rapidly along, through vicissitude, sorrow, and conviction, while with the other it had crept between the flower-fed banks of prosperity, fretting over the little pebbles of its daily course, unvexed by eddies, unopposed by rocks.

"Is it true you are going to be married?" said St. John. "I heard so in London."

"To whom, pray? It is the first I have heard of it."

"Lady Frances Cope—a charming girl, I was told."

"What nonsense!" He flushed, and looked annoyed, however, as he continued, "Just because we were great friends here! She is the last girl I should think of marrying, however . . . not that I mean to marry for an age. I am only beginning to know the sex. I must have more pre-matrimonial experience first."

"You will be married before two years are over," replied St. John, with an incredulous smile. "You are just the fellow to meet with

your 'fate' early, and then to the wind with your resolutions!"

Wilfred shook his head.

"No; I may have momentary aberration. I may be carried away to—to a certain point; but marry—no, I never——"

He looked over the glittering Arno, and instead of the Ponte alle Grazie, and the dome of the Carmine beyond, a little face arose he had once believed to be his "fate." He stopped short. Somehow, the conviction that what he was about to say was not true smote him. How sorrowful, how reproachful that little face looked! His resolutions had not been scattered to the winds. But Madame Uberti?

It all flashed by him in that moment's pause. Then, rousing himself, he said, quickly,

"And you? You have been in India these three years. Did you never think of marrying there? Tell me all about yourself."

A cloud of pain crossed St. John's face. He looked at his friend fixedly for a moment.

"No, I never thought of marrying. Some day or other I may tell you what befell me in

India—as a warning, Athelstone—but not now. My father was a judge, as you know. He died there last summer, so I threw up my office and came back in the autumn.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Oh! for several reasons. I hated office work, and there were circumstances which rendered my remaining in Calcutta very painful. Besides, my father left me far better off than I expected. Not that *that* would be sufficient excuse for being idle. Every fellow is better for work. Unfortunately, I am now too old to grind away at a profession.”

“Why not turn artist? You have plenty of talent.”

“A certain amount,” replied his friend, simply. “Enough for the amusement of an amateur, not for the vocation of a painter.”

“Stuff! You have more than half the painters whose works are exhibited in the Academy.”

“I don’t think it is worth while adding to the amount of indifferent pictures in the world. If I believed in myself, the want of training all

these years should not prevent my setting to work at anatomy, and all the rest of it now. As it is, I mark, learn, and inwardly digest the good things in nature and in art that I see; and some day or other you may find me blossoming out into that wonderful exotic of recent times—the art-critic, with all his jargon of word-painting.”

“Well, I know nothing about art, but I believe these critics you laugh at have done good work—destroyed some of the old fetish-worship, and taught people to look and judge for themselves.”

His friend returned, with an amused look,

“You were always apt to do that about everything, Athelstone. Have you given up holding forth about liberty of opinion, and so on?”

“My *views* are only strengthened with time. As to ‘holding forth’——”

“You will have an opportunity of doing that in the House. A Radical lord will be a variety.”

Wilfred laughed.

“Come and dine with me at seven. We

will have a smoke and chat afterwards.”

He had little admiration, and less reverence, for most living men: the poets, the philosophers, the politicians of the day, he generally “pooh-pooh’d.” But for this Hubert St. John at Eton he had always felt a regard, blent with a strange measure of respect for a lad only three years his senior; and, as he now parted from his friend, he fell to moralizing upon the unusual character which had stood out in relief from his other companions.

“It is very odd that he should have liked me. We had nothing in common, except that I took an interest in his drawing. He thrashed that bully Norton, who had kicked me—that was the first thing drew me to him. I used to call him ‘Sir Galahad,’ because he was so chivalrous—always succouring the oppressed. I wrote a poem about him. He tore it up, and said I was a young ass. I don’t think he ever appreciated my poetry. I wonder whether he would do so more now? He could be awfully passionate, I remember; though he generally had his passion wonderfully under control for a boy.

Took no end of prizes, I remember, though it was more by his determination and perseverance, I fancy, than by transcendent talent. He never cared for anything light—anything fanciful; he was always so awfully earnest. That's what makes him look so melancholy now. He has loved 'not wisely, but too well'—of course. Poor old Hubert! Well, of all the fellows I have ever known, he is the one in whom I would soonest trust."

How much reason he had to think thus, the reader will see, if he has patience to follow Wilfred Athelstone's career.

CHAPTER XV.

“**W**HAT have you been doing here for the last three months?” asked St. John of his friend that evening.

“Studying Italian character, chiefly,” replied Wilfred, after a moment’s hesitation. “First its art and literature ; secondly, in its people.”

“Talking of literature, have you given up writing poetry? You had a turn that way.”

Wilfred did not like the expression—“A turn that way!” It was clear his friend had been in India, and was not aware with what enthusiasm and reprobation his fugitive verses had been received in fashionable literary circles, and to what lively discussions they had given rise. He rose, however, and, walking to a

drawer, took out a pile of MSS., and said,

“If you care to hear them, these are some of the last things I have written,” and he began reading a sonnet in the deep rhythmical sing-song which is the triumph of sound over sense, affected by many latter-day poets.

St. John was silent for a few moments.

“I am not sure that I quite understand it, but the versification is clever, and the lines melodious. You always had great verbal facility.”

“Men like you, Hubert, seldom judge of poetry by the only right standard. You want the dry meaning of every word; whereas it is the feeling evoked, the imagination stirred, by the general colour of a poem, you should consider.”

“Certainly I want thoughts I can understand. My imagination refuses to be stirred without that. Surely words are like beautiful clothes, meant to adorn the body underneath, not to conceal emptiness and a few wires, like a dressmaker’s stand.”

“Well, if you want a human body, here is a

poem about one. Perhaps you will understand *this*," said the poet, with a slight touch of scorn; and he began to read a poem consisting of forty couplets, inspired—if such a word is admissible—by the charms of Madame Uberti.

"I do understand that," said St. John, taking the pipe out of his mouth, when Wilfred had finished. "I do understand all that, and I must say I don't care for it. It is like an auctioneer's list of a woman's attractions. I don't see the use of writing that sort of thing."

"It is anacreontic; of course, if you can't throw yourself into the spirit of the singer, it is not to be argued about. All human passion has a certain sacredness about it—is a worthy theme for the poet—and the gist of my poem (perhaps you missed it?) lies in that verse—

“ It is not for these I have woo'd thee,
 As the wind woo'd the mountains of old;
 It is not for these I have sued thee,
 As the sun sues the rose to unfold,
 The fragrance of thyme from the summit,
 The passion of scent from the south.
 It kissed, and I could not o'ercome it,
 The warm breath of love from thy mouth! ”

“Humph! There is a great deal to get to so little, Athelstone. I think you might do much better than that if you had a mind; you used to be interested in deeper matters. Have you nothing there that is more thoughtful—more in that line?”

“Oh! yes. Here is a thing I sent to the ‘Pantheon’ a few months ago, and which had a good deal of success. But I doubt whether you will like it. You are orthodox, I know.”

They were fiery verses, written in one of his combative moods, directed against all formulas of Faith, and far more intolerant than the intolerance they deprecated. There was nothing new in them; St. John had heard the same cry repeatedly, in less hysterical prose. Still he was bound to admit that some of the lines had a fine ring that was calculated to carry away a hearer who was more open to the impressions of rhyme than reason.

“The worst of them,” he continued, “is, that, in spite of their vehemence, they don’t bring with them any sense of *your* conviction to me.

You can't believe all you say there ; it is impossible—

“ ‘ The righteous, whose rigour and rancour
Have blighted the young buds, like frost . . . ’

You can't believe that the effect of all righteousness is to blight, sadden, and destroy? You must have known good people whose religion was a living faith, working in their lives, and tending to make them really happier?”

“ Yes ; but they are the exceptions. I see lying, worldliness, and greed, hand in hand with long prayers, fasting, and all the rest of it ; and I say, if those people believe in their religion, what is it worth to them? They put it on and off at their church-doors, like shoes at the door of a mosque. But the fact is, not one tenth of the people who go to church *do* believe. They go from habit—for ‘ example's sake,’ or out of regard to the wishes of those they love, and among the latter is myself. If men really believed what they pretend, they could not lead the lives they do.”

“ Do you think there is any scheme, compact, or career possible to Humanity, that can com-

mand thorough sincerity? How many books, how many pictures, how many lives are lies!—self-deceptions, sometimes, but none the less untrue to some portion of the inner man. Do you remember what Faust says about our two angels—our double nature? How can we expect absolute thoroughness in religion, when we find it in nothing else?”

“But, as I pointed out just now, St. John, religion is a *premium* upon insincerity.” He stood up, and kicked vigorously at the wood-fire, then faced about, having gathered his antagonistic forces in hand, and continued—“It is far worse than any other insincerity can be in life, because it eats into the heart of what ought to be proof against all humbug. How can a structure built up of a lot of fables—which were all very well in the infancy of the world, but which no one believes now—be a citadel of truth and a refuge? How can it stand against the beleaguering armies of science, when its own garrison is split up into fifty different sections? It served its purpose once; everything does in this world of progress; but

it is obsolete, an anachronism; we have got beyond it."

"Beyond it? and where?" said St. John, with a sigh. "Into chaos—into a world without form, and void; while the conditions of Humanity remain the same. If you destroy, without giving us anything in its place, shall we be the better or the happier for that? Are we so much cleverer than Plato, or Marcus Aurelius, or Thomas à Kempis, or Shakspeare (I take great names at hazard, no matter what their faith), that we can be cut adrift from all beliefs, and not be sufferers by it?"

"I don't want men to be cut away from all belief—only from priestcraft and the dogmatism of the Church."

"For which you would substitute some sort of Pantheism, I suppose?"

"I don't care much what you call it. I believe in a First Cause, and in Nature's unerring laws. I believe in that 'absolute religion which is hidden in all other religions,' as Theodore Parker says. But I loathe and abominate the endeavour to cram doctrines

down men's throats which their reason repudiates, and from which their sense of justice revolts."

"That is all very well; but how do you decide what is right from what is wrong, if you reject all authority except Nature? The conscience of a man who has no unalterable standard of right and wrong is certainly not to be trusted. He may be high-minded, benevolent, patriotic; and, because he does not recognise any Divine law over-ruling what *he* considers an heroic impulse for the good of his fellow-men, he may become a regicide. That's where Nature's laws land you."

"The conscience of civilized man in the present state of the world denounces any crime against his fellow. Aberrations cannot be used as arguments."

"But our civilized consciences are additionally open to sophistry," St. John said, quickly. Then he stopped and looked, as if he hesitated to continue. "I can only speak for myself," he added, after a pause. "Doctor Johnson said that every man knows *probably* worse of him-

self than he certainly knows of his neighbour. Experience has taught me that conscience can be made, by plausible arguments, to accept anything—will drift hither and thither with the tides of opinion—until anchored to a rock from which it cannot break away.”

The conversation between the two friends continued far into the night. Wilfred fought with all the intemperate zeal of an enthusiast for theological and intellectual freedom; Hubert's arguments did not touch him. Perhaps few arguments ever do, in a discussion of this kind; the combatants stand too far apart. Hubert did not expatiate upon his past. The longer he talked to Wilfred, the stronger his conviction grew that his friend would profit by no vicarious experience. He must “learn in suffering” something better worth teaching “in song” than the worship of Liberty, and the destruction of Law.

Nevertheless, as I look back upon the past, I am disposed to regard it as very unfortunate that circumstances prevented Wilfred Athelstone accompanying his friend to Corsica at this

time. The influence of one mind upon another in daily intercourse may be incalculable, however valueless the result of a mere contest of opinions may prove. Lady Athelstone urged her son so strongly to return to England with her (fearing, I have no doubt, that he might be lured back to Florence from Corsica), that Wilfred felt he had no choice but to yield. He was never inconsiderate of her comfort; in all that concerned her personally, he was amiable and self-denying, though he often ran counter to her wishes in other respects.

So the two friends parted, not to meet again for months, and then only casually. The sad and solitary man went and took counsel of nature as to what he should do with his future; the spoilt child of fortune returned to the small world where this lover of liberty reigned an autocrat, and to the bigger world where his vanity was ministered to in a thousand ways.

CHAPTER XVI.

LADY ATHELSTONE, along with her indecision and mistrust of her own perceptions, worked with the steady perseverance and untiring energy of a mole for the attainment of any object the accomplishment of which she had at heart. She had given herself infinite pains, while in Florence, to secure for Nellie Dawson a good situation as nursery governess. Until this was accomplished, she felt that it was out of the question to think of returning to Athelstone. Her son's interests demanded that the girl should be removed; her kindness demanded that this should not be at the expense of Nellie's comfort, but

that it should be a benefit to her in every way.

Lady Athelstone had advertised for some weeks, had written letters to various societies in London on her *protégée's* behalf, and had answered several letters from ladies requiring a domestic slave to undertake the rudimentary education of their children, before the right situation offered.

Mrs. Goldwin was known to Lady Athelstone, not only as the wife of a rich shipbuilder in the north, but as a perfect lady of very cultivated tastes, whose health was indifferent, and who led, in consequence, a somewhat retired life. She had two children, to whom she was devoted, and Nellie would therefore possess the rare advantage of close and constant intercourse with a woman of refined and elevated character. Lady Athelstone did not hesitate to accept for her *protégée* the liberal terms which Mrs. Goldwin offered. It was the position, of all others, best suited to the girl's present needs, as she wrote to tell Mrs. Dawson, who, though sorely troubled at parting with her daughter, thank-

fully assented to Lady Athelstone's arrangements.

All this had happened some weeks before the departure from Florence, and Nellie had been established nearly a month at the Goldwins, in Northumberland, when Wilfred and his mother returned home.

It was then the middle of April. Wilfred had arrived in London in time to take his seat before the Easter recess, had elected not to return to Oxford, and was now at Athelstone with his mother, occupied with business matters which demanded his attention.

He announced many strange doctrines upon tenant right, which made his father's old steward open his eyes, and shake his head with a sigh; but his dealings with the farmers and cottagers on his property were not characterised by any conspicuous acts of folly. Until one day, when the bailiff declared the young lord had taken clear leave of his senses. It was on this wise.

Lady Athelstone had, after much mental exercise, broken to her son, while they were in London, the fact of Nellie Dawson's removal

from Ripple. Wilfred received the announcement in silence. What could he say? He knew, in his heart, it was the best thing that could have happened for them both. But he had been making all manner of heroic resolves; and to find that these would be of none effect—that the ground was cut away from him, so to speak—and that no merit of self-sacrifice might now be his, was a little trying, a little irritating to one of his temperament. Had time and absence lessened the young girl's impression on his heart? He answered no; and perhaps he was right; for certainly no other image had effaced or interfered with it. He thought of the tender light in her eyes, he recalled the sweet tones of her clear young voice, with as vivid and passionate delight as he did the day they parted. But the shadow of his father stood between them. He had resolved to resist the temptation against which the old lord had so urgently warned him, but the temptation was removed out of his path. He felt defrauded.

One morning he walked over to Ripple.

“What accounts have you of Nellie, Mrs. Dawson?” he asked, after he had sat down in the widow’s cottage.

“The very best, my lord,” replied the widow, quickly. She was peeling some onions, and did not look up; but her face flushed slightly as she continued—“She is quite happy and contented, as I’m sure she’s every reason to be. I couldn’t have expected such good fortune for her as to find such a home as she’s got, and such a lady as Mrs. Goldwin, my lord; and I’m sure I return my lady my most grateful thanks.”

“We are both very much interested in her, as you know, Mrs. Dawson,” said Athelstone, drawing patterns with his stick upon the floor.

“Yes, my lord; and my lady’ll like to know that the girl is making advances every day in her studies, she tells me. Mr. Goldwin is a great deal from home, and she reads to Mrs. Goldwin of an evening when the children are a-bed. The lady’s a kind o’ mother to her, and never tires of explaining things to the girl, it

seems. It's a happy change from the drudgery of school-teacher, which was a'most too much for her. It's only me as it comes hard on to lose her; but I don't mind, for I know she's a deal happier than she could be with me here."

This was an unusually long oration for Mrs. Dawson; she must have been moved by some powerful motive to make it; but it did not completely satisfy her auditor. Of course he was glad that Nellie was in such good keeping; glad to find that Mrs. Goldwin was a cultivated as well as a kind woman; glad that the girl should have already attained to some moderate degree of contentment. But, what! not a regret for the past? A happy change to leave Ripple, and his vicinity? The separation, which he had nerved himself for with what he believed to be an heroic effort, did it cause no struggle in Nellie herself? He could not be completely satisfied. He knit his brows and sighed.

"It must be a great trial to her all the same to part from you and—and Ripple, Mrs. Dawson."

“ Oh! she’s a good child to me, my lord, and an affectionate; but life is all before her, and new things is pleasant to the young. She was glad to leave Ripple, though she’s as fond of me as I could wish; but she knows as it’s for her good, and so do I.”

“ We know that physic is good for us, but it does not make us relish it. Mrs. Dawson, you have occupied this cottage ever since you married, have you not?”

“ Yes, my lord; nineteen years come Michaelmas.”

“ Well, you would be sorry to be turned out. Life is uncertain; my possession here may be a short one. It is in my power to make over this cottage to you, free, for the period of your life, and I am going to execute a deed to that effect. It will save you a few pounds, and my successor, if you live to see him, might raise the rent.”

“ I’m sure, my lord, I don’t know how to find words to——”

“ Don’t try, Mrs. Dawson. I know you are grateful, and that is enough. Tell Nellie I have

been glad to do this for your sake and hers, will you?"

Then he shook hands with the somewhat bewildered woman, and left the cottage.

Mrs. Dawson stated the fact briefly when she wrote to her daughter; she did not dilate on it, nor did she give the young lord's message.

There was a fund of good sense in this gentle, uneducated woman. She had got to see pretty clearly how matters stood between the wilful and ill-disciplined young man, whose heart had many a kind impulse, but whose conduct was at the mercy of every gust of passion, and her pure and tender little daughter, whose health had been so severely tried, in the past year, by the struggle to overthrow the love which had grown up within her unconsciously, year by year, since childhood. Something the poor girl, in her bitter desolation and self-abasement, had let fall after Lady Athelstone and her son were gone abroad. It was but a few words, wrung out, in the watches of the night, when she was ill, and her mother sat beside her bed. The widow did not press her child to say more; she

soothed her with gentle words of encouragement and comfort; then, as the girl grew better able to bear the tonic of graver and stronger language, Mrs. Dawson applied her styptic to the wound with firm though loving hand. This evil, which clung like a bind-weed round her child's heart, must be plucked out, and trodden under foot. There was no good to be got out of it, only poisonous exhalation, which threatened to destroy the healthy activity and equipoise of body and mind. Such was the spirit and substance, if not the framework, of the mother's exordium.

And, to outward seeming, it worked its effect, though slowly, painfully, and after many a hard-fought battle. When the time came that Nellie should leave her home, she was pale and thin, but quite composed. The great sorrow in her eyes was hidden away; she smiled rarely, but had regained her strength, and capacity of application, and self-control. Mrs. Dawson was satisfied.

Nellie's new employer was at first puzzled and disappointed to find the girl of scarcely seven-

teen she had hoped would be a blithe companion to her children, so joyless and subdued. But Mrs. Goldwin had keen instincts, as well as a kind heart; they led her to the conclusion that there was some immediate cause for this depression, which might be removed in time. It was not natural that a well-grown girl should rigidly perform her duties day by day, and the sound of a glad laugh be never heard. She would give her a trial; and this was the beginning of a course of wise and tender treatment to which the young governess was subjected at the hands of her mistress. Some of Mrs. Goldwin's friends told her she would completely spoil the girl—make her forget her station—unfit her for the drudgery of a nursery school-room. The lady smiled, and heeded not. She had her own opinions upon most matters; and, being left at perfect liberty by her husband to do as she liked, she seldom troubled herself about the approval of others.

She led a very solitary life with her children, Mr. Goldwin seldom being at home for more than a few days, and her health obliging her to

remain a prisoner in the house during the winter months. She read a great deal, and enjoyed discussion upon what she had read, having lived at one time in a circle of intellectual men and women, who had fostered her natural tastes. She rarely met anyone now who talked about books; the state of trade, the weather, and the crops forming the main loaves of conversation with her husband's friends, into which a few plums of country gossip were surreptitiously introduced by the wives from time to time.

Perhaps it was less meritorious, therefore, than it might at first appear, when Mrs. Goldwin, being interested in her young governess's appearance, resolved to try the experiment upon her of that education, so far higher and more precious than all the teaching of the schools, which constant intercourse with a thoughtful, cultivated mind can alone give. She found that Nellie's nature was not only far more refined and sensitive than that of most girls in a superior station of life; it was also singularly receptive. Not that her memory, or

what is commonly called "quickness," was remarkable; but her fine taste to distinguish the true from the false in literature, her sympathy with all that was noble, her fancy, so swift to follow wild flights of poetry, were gifts which no artificial training can impart.

By slow degrees the poor little frozen heart thawed under the warmth of kindness and constant occupation for her thoughts. She had no time to sit and meditate. During the day she and the children were often with Mrs. Goldwin; driving with her, or walking beside her garden-chair, as the spring came on, or playing about the drawing-room, when she had no visitors; and, after the children were in bed, every evening Mrs. Goldwin sent for her governess to read and talk with her. The girl's mind expanded like a flower. Her powers of reflection had been too early forced by circumstances, perhaps, for the elasticity of youthful spirit ever completely to return; but before many weeks were passed Mrs. Goldwin saw that her children laughed and romped fearlessly with their new governess, and clambered upon her knee and

hugged her with a vehemence which spoke well for the understanding that subsisted between them.

Into Nellie's past she never inquired; and the girl would sooner have died than confess, even to this excellent friend, the sorrow that had overshadowed her young life. Alas! at night, when she knelt down beside her little bed, and prayed, her first thought—she acknowledged it with shame—was of *him*. All else was still secondary to that one idea. She might school herself throughout the busy day; she might, for a time, banish that image, but, at this hour, when the poor child laid bare her heart, she could no longer dissemble with herself.

“All thy best blessings, O my Father, keep for him. Guard him from harm; give him true wisdom; and may the echo of his good deeds reach me from afar. I ask no more than this. I have sinned, O Lord. What was I that I should raise my eyes so high? Thy hand hath been laid heavily upon me, though not in anger. I thank Thee for all thy mercies. Be patient with me still.”

This, or something like it, was the substance of her prayer, night after night. The months went by; she never heard his name mentioned, nor did her mother, since the return of the family to the Castle, ever speak of the young lord, after that brief statement to which I have referred.

Mrs. Goldwin was too clever not to have arrived at some approximation to the truth as regarded Nellie, by that process of induction which is called "putting two and two together." She never dropped a hint that she read between the lines of the girl's enthusiastic praises of Lady Athelstone, her eloquent description of the Castle, its woods, its gardens, its stately rooms; and her absolute silence as to the young man who now reigned there. But all this was not lost upon her auditor.

One day the girl was reading aloud, when she came to a quotation—

" 'Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all!"

Struck by the line she, half unconsciously,

paused. Mrs. Goldwin sighed, and then looked up.

“You are too young, my dear, to feel the truth and beauty of that.”

The girl coloured, and replied, after a momentary hesitation,

“No, Mrs. Goldwin, I think I can understand that the worst fate in life would be never to have loved anything.”

Mrs. Goldwin said no more.

Another time she was arranging some flowers in a vase, when Mrs. Goldwin entered the room, without the girl's hearing her. She was repeating a verse of poetry in a soft, low voice, as she took up the roses, one by one, and smelt them. Mrs. Goldwin listened.

“Unto my rose I gave a rose,
And, ‘Never more,’ I said,
‘Shall this fair flower its scent disclose,
When its warm heart lies dead.
But though Love's heart be wounded, crush'd,
Its sweet breath never dies,
And when our voices both are hush'd,
It still will scent the skies.’”

“What is that you are repeating, my dear?”

Nellie started.

“Nothing, Mrs. Goldwin. I mean, only a verse I—I once heard.”

“Do you know who wrote it? It sounds almost like Waller, or one of those old fanciful poets.”

“It is Lord Athelstone’s,” she said.

“Oh! You have not read much of his, I suppose?”

“I had to copy some—his prize poem on Carthage, and some translations from the Greek—when I was at the Castle.” Then, after a moment’s demur, she added, quickly, without looking up—“They are published. I saw them advertised in the paper yesterday. Would you not like to read them, Mrs. Goldwin?”

She *had* read them, and the book was in the house; but she answered, unhesitatingly,

“No, my dear; I don’t think it is at all the sort of reading I should like.”

In Mrs. Goldwin’s monotonous existence, the successful endeavour to rouse and interest her young companion, was an occupation which drew Nellie closer to her heart each day. And

with the increasing affection which she felt for the girl, there was thankfulness that she had been removed from the perils which had, no doubt, environed her position at home, and that she was safely harboured here. And thus the summer passed by.

In the meantime, to return for a moment to the transaction I have spoken of as taking place at Ripple in the spring, it was not effected without strong remonstrance from Wilfred's agent, and some mild expostulation from his mother.

"It is a precedent, my lord, which you will find leads to no end of trouble and future difficulty," said the former.

"I don't admit the force of precedent in such a case. I have a right to do what I choose with my own; and I choose to give that cottage to Mrs. Dawson for her life. As to trouble and difficulty," he added, laughing, "that will be *your* look-out, Matcham. If it wasn't for that sort of bother, I should be my own agent, you know."

Mr. Matcham went his ways; but he was

heard to say more than once that this was the next thing to Communism,—suddenly, without rhyme or reason, to give up one of the best cottages in the village of Ripple, held by a woman who was well able to pay for it, when there were such a number of indigent tenants out of whom Mr. Matcham had infinite trouble to screw the rent!

“Have you considered well, my dear boy?” said Lady Athelstone. “Is it—is it quite wise to do this sort of thing? I do not think your father——”

“Did not my father propose to give her five hundred pounds if she went to Australia?”

“But—but she declined. You see, my dear Wilfred—under all the circumstances people—I really think people might talk.”

“Let them; it won’t influence me,” and the young man walked away.

CHAPTER XVII.

LORD ATHELSTONE'S first volume of collected verse was published that June, and created considerable stir. The audacity of this young patrician poet's utterances took away people's breath. Was he a second Byron or not? Were these whirlwinds of passion, these scathing denunciations, mere sound and fury, signifying nothing? Or was he, in truth, one of those rare beings in whom all that is irrational, unprincipled, and offensive to good taste must be pardoned for the sake of their transcendent genius?

Ecclectic-fashionable circles fought over these poems; some declared them to be "entirely noble, informed with that far-seeing spirit of

the poet (or prophet) which subjects all minor moralities to the great exigencies of our Human Nature." Others compared the new star to a dancing dervish, "fluent and flatulent; his excitement being begotten of a rotatory motion of rhyme which lashes him into a frenzy of froth and foam." Severe strictures and extravagant praise of the book appeared in the critical journals. One article, beginning "This will never do," was said to have sent the volume at once into a second edition.

They were discussing him at Lady B——'s one night, in whose *salon* opinions the most opposed met upon common ground, and lances in politics and literature were freely broken.

"Are we to encourage this young man?" asked the lady of the house of an eminent statesman. "I am afraid he is very immoral; but how original! What ingenious versification! What subtle harmony!"

"His philosophy amounts to this," observed the statesman. "There is nothing true, and there is nothing new; and it don't signify. Enjoy yourselves."

“It is horribly irreligious,” said his wife, severely, “besides its immorality. It is a book I would never allow to lie upon my table.”

“By all means, my dear. Keep it under the sofa-cushion,” and the statesman smiled grimly.

“Irreligious? Oh! but its Pantheism is so exquisite. It breathes the piety of the prairie, if not of theology,” piped a young man with a long, yearning throat, who spoke like an expression-stop, and wrote æsthetic essays. “Have you read Lord Athelstone’s ‘Wail of the Wandering Winds’? People call it blasphemous, but there is more of unconscious devotion in the sad sougning of the breeze, the wild agony of the screaming tempest, as one hears it in those strophes and antistrophies, than in many a psalm. Indeed, it *is* a psalm, full of the remorse of unaccomplished desire, of struggle from trammels of the finite towards infinity!”

“Struggles from trammels, I admit,” observed the cynical statesman. “As to the rest——” he shrugged his shoulders, with a smile.

But let one half the world deride or reprobate

the other—which included most of the young men and women whose eyes and ears were more sensitive than their understandings—the vast crowd who are swept, resistless, every year into maelströms of enthusiasm over some vain thing, held the new poet to be “a revelation,” and fed on him in secret, or avowed, delight.

Towards the end of July Hubert St. John returned to England, after visiting the Greek Islands, and wandering slowly up the little-visited Dalmatian coast; writing, sketching, pondering over the scenes and monuments of historic interest he visited, or, better still, letting Nature and Sunshine, in silence, work their beneficent influence on wounds which, though outwardly healed, had left him numbed, and, as it seemed, disabled for social enjoyment. He was too soundly built, however, intellectually and physically, for his recuperative power not to be strong at six and twenty. He came back happier than he had been for the past two years, with hopes and convictions which had been fluent, consolidated, and ready

to find expression in immediate action. What these were will presently be apparent.

He met Athelstone on the steps of the St. James's Club the day after his arrival. After inquiring where his friend had been during the past four months, Wilfred said,

“I suppose you have not seen my book yet? I daresay you have not even read a review on it? I am glad to say it has been awfully cut up—just what I wanted.”

“I suppose you think it necessary for a book to be *cut up* in order to be *devoured*?” said the other, smiling. “But the only notice of your book I saw did not slash at it very viciously.”

“You mean that it damned it with faint praise? That was the work of an enemy, then. My only friends among the critics are those who ‘deplore that this young man, with all his great gifts,’ &c. Those who pat me on the head, as a young lord, who has ‘really, in spite of his birth, got something in him, and who may perhaps do better things by and by,’ I should like to strangle them. I wish *you*

would review the book, old fellow. I'll send it you to-night."

Hubert shook his head, laughing.

"You won't complain of my lenity, if I do. You had better not ask me. Remember what I told you at Florence."

"I do remember. Our views are not the same on most points; but you have capital brains, and you are not prejudiced. Above all, you are not bound to turn out so many pages of ill-digested matter a week. Come down to Athelstone next week, and let us argue out our philosophies under the cedars on the lawn. We leave town on Monday."

"I am sorry I cannot at present. I am kept by business in London for the next fortnight, and then I have promised to go to a cousin of mine in Northumberland. Later in the autumn, if you will ask me——"

"Write when you can come. We shall be there till November. After that, it is probable I may go to Rome. But I shall send you the poems, and, remember, you are to write a

criticism. The *Regent Street Review* will take it, I know."

As a matter of fact, St. John did not leave London for some weeks. Before that time came he had found work for his hands, and an object for the outlay of a large portion of his ample income. It came to his knowledge that a mechanics' institute was needed in a certain very poor district in the East-end of London; but funds were not forthcoming to establish this. There was, moreover, a hunger for intellectual help among the keen-eyed and inquiring artisans who swarmed in those narrow alleys, which there was none to satisfy. Those who had the capacity had not the time, those who had the time had not the capacity. The demands upon the over-worked clergy were too numerous for them to be able to devote many hours in the month to seeking out and becoming friendly with men who perhaps never, or very rarely, came to church.

This was the want which St. John saw it was in his power to supply. The erection of a suit-

able building, and the formation of a library, would be the work of several months; and having concluded the purchase of the site, and approved of the architect's plans, his presence in London was no longer necessary. But, in the interval which must elapse before any personal supervision and organization of his scheme could begin, might he not pave the way to that free and friendly intercourse which he hoped to establish between the artisans and himself, by a little weekly chat upon paper, carried on from wherever he might chance to be, on whatsoever subject it pleased his correspondents to suggest?

The plan which he conceived and carried out was this: to print, and to distribute, on the payment of a small sum quarterly, a paper each week, in which one subject should be treated, and a certain number of questions propounded by his readers. For, as they read, objections would probably arise in their minds, and it might be that some of these he would find it hard to meet. But, when it was so, he would frankly confess his inability; for his aim was

to establish himself on the footing, not of an instructor, but of a friend, ready to discuss difficulties, with no assumption of omniscience : a friend who, by adventitious circumstances, had enjoyed facilities for study and travel denied to those with whom he now talked ; but not, necessarily for that, deeper-sighted or more highly-endowed than they. There were things he could tell them which they knew not : theories, arguments, quotations, which would be new to them, and which they would ponder over, or discuss among each other ; but he divined that there might be acute and logical minds among those artisans, who would detect a fallacy in the theory—a flaw in the argument, and who would brush away quotations like flies from a window—possibly as obstructions to the light—whose buzzings could not affect the truth, as each individual intelligence receives it.

It was with no delusion, therefore, as to the smoothness of his task that he left London, after establishing the machinery of which he was to be the motive power. The preliminaries

had offered few difficulties; he supplied money and a scheme; some coadjutors among the middle class presented themselves; the men themselves contributed a zealous curiosity and desire to forward their new friend's views.

He had found a stimulant for his mental energy. Work, the best calculated to satisfy his needs, was now ready to his hand. He felt a certain anxiety as to its success: that is incident to all new undertakings; but to feel anxiety about anything is preferable to the indifference as to all things which had threatened to mildew the young man's mind a few months since. His hopes might be only partially realized, but here was work to be done which he believed he could do, and for which, perhaps, few were so well-fitted by circumstances as himself. Anyhow, if he overestimated his strength, if he failed in what he had undertaken, the impetus given to his life, linking it with other lives and other interests than his own, was higher than aimless study or a search after the picturesque.

He went straight to Northumberland, taking

with him a box of such books of reference as he thought he was not likely to find in his cousin's house. She was, however, a woman of cultivation and refinement, and her name was Mrs. Goldwin.

They had been together a great deal as children; indeed, up to the time of Mary St. John's marriage, she and Hubert had constantly met during his vacations, and had been more like a younger brother and elder sister than cousins often are. Between them existed a strong regard—the regard that springs from sympathy and a complete understanding, even more than from a community of tastes. During the last six years, however, they had only met once, and that was for a few hours in London, on Hubert's return from India last November. Much had befallen them both during those six years, and both were much changed. Hubert had leapt from boyhood to mature manhood—a manhood that had sinned and suffered, that had learnt its idols to be of clay, and had found the fruit of the tree of knowledge bitter to the taste.

The Judge, though a fond, had been a somewhat rigid and severe parent; there had been an episode in his son's life in India which he sternly reprov'd; and almost immediately after this he died, while yet the estrangement between them existed. These circumstances had very powerfully affected the young man; nay, more, they had wrought a considerable change in his character. Had he been subject to such influences later in life, it would have been different. When the bark is toughened, and the branches naturally bent, no wind can alter the contour of the oak; but stripling trees are swayed one way by the south-wester, and for ever retain that inclination.

Hubert had been high-spirited, enthusiastic, enterprising, as a boy; that his temperament was only modified at six-and-twenty was shown by the vigour and alacrity he displayed in maturing the scheme he had now devised; but Mrs. Goldwin knew that a great revolution had been wrought in her cousin's character. The events of his life, his letters, all had prepared her for this; and she awaited his coming now,

not without a certain fear that between the Hubert she had known so intimately and this man had grown up another individuality with whose complexities she would find it more difficult to sympathise.

As to her own life, it might be summed up in a few words. She had been reared in an atmosphere of intellectuality and refinement; she had married, at four-and-twenty, into an atmosphere of ox-like calm, splendour, stupidity. Her husband was termed—and he well deserved the encomium—“a very worthy man.” He was really fond of his wife, and had the most unbounded confidence in her; but he was engrossed in business, which obliged him to be a great deal from home, and Mrs. Goldwin’s health, since her last confinement, had compelled her more than once to go abroad. Thus months sometimes elapsed without the husband and wife meeting; and it must honestly be admitted that this was not a loss calculated to disturb the current of Mrs. Goldwin’s existence. She respected her husband; she was grateful to him; and he was the father of the two children

in whom her life was bound up ; but between this strangely-assorted pair there could only be a community of interest, none of thought. If the truth must be told, she rather dreaded a *tête-à-tête* with him. When they had talked of the children, and the new glass-houses, only the fly-leaves of conversation were left to be turned over between them ; the body of the book was done. She could affect no interest in the iron-trade, or in county-business, or even in the broader field of politics ; he could affect none in literature or in art. She could not despise him ; she knew he had capital abilities of a certain kind ; he had strong common sense, and was liberal in his dealings with all men. On his side, he admired, though he did not the least understand, his wife.

He knew as little of her now as he had done six years ago, when he asked the beautiful and penniless Mary St. John to marry him. Why had she said "yes" ? It was the old story ; love at eighteen, disappointment ; an interval of five years, and then acceptance of an excellent offer, in the world's estimation, from a sense

of the expediency, if not the obligation, of a woman's marrying to affluence and apathy, when the alternative was spinsterhood with straitened means. She would probably have acted no differently now, had the same alternative been placed before her; for she possessed what is called "strong good sense." In other words, though she had some romance in her composition, with an exalted ideal of what married life should be, she was not deficient in worldly wisdom. The cousins had each had a story; only hers was simple enough, his full of passionate complication. The past with her had long been dead and buried—hope and expectancy only lived in her children now; how would she find it with Hubert?

It was this question she propounded to herself constantly in the days that preceded his arrival at Danecourt. His letters indicated that all the buoyancy of youth was gone; but men are differently constituted from women; surely, at six and twenty, the capacity for another love, which should vivify the young man's life, was not impossible?

The busy weaving brain of woman, that turns out fabrics of such marvellous and un-serviceable texture, sent its shuttle to and fro, with gossamer threads of possibilities. Her four years' seniority now seemed to her as twenty; and it was with almost a maternal feeling of affectionate solicitude that she greeted St. John to her home, resolved to afford him every opportunity of reconstructing a romance which should this time have a happy termination.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE Miss Brawnes were handsome, highly-cultivated young women. They were so decorative in a room, and all they did was so well done, that it seemed surprising they should lack the subtle charm by which inferior women often enslave a number of helpless men.

Men never became helpless under their influence. They flirted, but with discretion; and, on learning that the sisters were poor, turned their thoughts in other directions, without poignant regret. It was chiefly by their own sex that the Miss Brawnes were enthusiastically admired; and Mrs. Goldwin, who was not much given to neighbour cultivation, duly

appreciated and always invited them to stay at Danecourt when she had other guests.

They were established there when Hubert arrived. "Either of them would make him a most suitable wife," thought Mrs. Goldwin; "but I should prefer Eliza—I do hope he will fall in love with Eliza;" and, if such thought can be termed a scheme, she certainly planned one for the realization of her wish. But the futility of such is proverbial.

"I hope, now you are come back to England, and are tired of wandering, you tell me, dear Hubert, that you will think of marrying."

They were alone in her boudoir the morning after his arrival, when she said this. He shook his head, with a smile, and something like a sigh.

"Not until I meet such a woman as I have never yet known, Mary."

She paused; then felt impelled to say,

"But you loved once, dear boy, though

unwisely—why not again, and to better purpose?”

“I was blind. A fellow may be blind once—especially at one and twenty—he is a fool if he is blind twice. My eyes are too wide open, I believe, ever to fall in love again.”

“Nonsense! You would be so much happier married, Hubert.”

“Marriage must be either Heaven or Hell, in my opinion. To have a companion who is not only flesh of one’s flesh, but soul of one’s soul, is the happiness accorded but to few. Less than this I should not be content with.”

Mrs. Goldwin’s fair face contracted for a moment.

“You expect too much of human nature. If all exacted so much, how many marriages would there be? And is not the balance of happiness with those who *do* marry, have children, and merge their personal interests in others, rather than with those who lead solitary lives?”

“I don’t know about the aggregate, Mary; every man must judge for himself. Some soft-hearted, easy-going fellows seem to be so constituted that they only ask that a woman should be fond of them to take her to their bosom at once. It is much the same whether she be Jane or Eliza.”

“How very odd,” laughed his cousin. “Are you aware that those are the Miss Brawnes’ names?”

“No. I beg their pardon for taking them in vain.”

“Very handsome girls, ain’t they?”

“Y—yes—good-looking, certainly.”

“And so clever.”

“Ah! I daresay.”

“Eliza is really delightful—so very agreeable.”

“Just a little self-conscious— isn’t she?”

“Not at all. That is only manner. I assure you it entirely wears off.”

“Does it? Well, she may be charming, but she is not the kind of woman who would ever interest me. By-the-by, was the young girl

who came in after dinner your governess? I didn't speak to her, but she struck me as lovely, and the young parson seemed to think so, for he never left her side."

"Miss Dawson has a very sweet face, and is a very nice girl. She is only a nursery governess, and of very humble origin, but she has great natural refinement, and I find her quite a companion when we are alone."

"What a lucky thing for her to have come here! I suppose this is her first place? She looks so young."

"Yes; and if I had not received such a very strong recommendation of her from Lady Athelstone——"

"From Lady Athelstone?"

"She was pupil-teacher in their school, and her mother lives in their village."

"How small the world is! I have not a large acquaintance, as you know, but Athelstone was a school-fellow of mine, and, I may say, is still my friend."

"Dear me! I should have thought, from all I have heard, he was not at all the sort

of man you would have chosen for a friend."

"Friendship is sometimes the result of circumstances. Certainly Athelstone and I agree upon very few points; but we were in the same house together at Eton, and he exhibited a blind reverence for me then (I am a good deal older), which, I am sorry to say, years have corrected. Still he is very cordial; and I feel that, in spite of all his nonsense, there is much that is good in him, which I think will predominate—if he falls into wise hands."

"And that is the reason you cling to him? Why did you not prevent his publishing all this abominable poetry?"

"I could not have prevented it, had I been in England. He is very obstinate; and when I talk of wise hands, they must be hands that do not appear to guide, but, gently superimposed, use a magnetic influence of which the subject is unconscious. Have you ever seen a person *willed* to do a thing. That is how Athelstone must be moved. He is a strange fellow, and I fear may cause much trouble to those who love him; but he interests me."

“I think he must be a very unprincipled man. I have been obliged to put away his book, for fear Miss Dawson should see it. She is naturally interested in all that relates to the Athelstones. Say nothing about these poems, unless she asks you.”

* * * * *

That afternoon Hubert declined to drive with his cousin and the Miss Brawnes to a ruin some miles distant, alleging that he had his forthcoming paper to prepare. Mrs. Goldwin was disappointed; but she was too clever not to know that a man shut up in a carriage, against his will, for two hours and a half, would be in a frame of mind unfavourable to the first inroads of fascination, and she submitted in silence. To-night, she said, after a solitary afternoon, he would, by a natural rebound, find keener enjoyment in the society of these charming girls. Hubert had always a fine taste for music. Eliza should play that scherzo of Mendelssohn's—it would at once delight and astonish him. This would lay the first

stone. And so the fair builder of a Spanish castle went a-driving.

It was a very still, golden day, early in September. In the garden it was just the moment when the glories of summer and autumn meet; when the advancing dahlias and china-asters come face to face with the retiring geraniums and calceolarias. Hubert looked out upon it all from his open window, and, after writing a few sentences, it occurred to him that he might as well be seated under one of those wide-spreading beeches, inhaling the sweet breath of all the growing things around, as remain imprisoned in his bed-room, now that he was secure from interruption; for the other men staying at Danecourt had gone out partridge-shooting early.

He sauntered across the lawn, note-book in hand, till he came to a little stream which divided the garden from the beech-wood beyond. He crossed the small foot-bridge, and had advanced a few yards down the winding path, when a pair of stout little legs, carrying a small rosy blossom of a face, ran up to him,

in all the sweet confidence of five years' old. She had been picking beech-nuts, and the white serge frock she clutched tight with two hot hands was filled with her treasure.

“Look, what I've dot for de pigs! Dere's lots more; tum along, and I'll show you. Will you put dese in your pocket? Den I will pick up more.”

“But if we carry off all the nuts, Tricksy, there will be no young trees to grow up.”

“Oh, 'es, dere will. God sticks in de trees, I know.”

In an incautious moment she let go her frock to tug at his coat, and the pigs' dessert lay scattered on the path.

Hubert was fond of children; but, as he stooped to pick up the nuts, he remembered his essay with a sigh. For the evolution of exact thought, he would have done better to remain in his bed-room.

“Well, I will put these in my pocket for you, Tricksy, and stay here while you run off and look for more.”

But this arrangement did not suit Miss

Tricksy, who was partial to the institution of slavery.

“No, no. You must tum wid me. Dere is lots of boo’ful flowers, and—” she pulled lustily at his coat; but here a sweet voice, belonging to a speaker whom St. John had not heard approaching behind him, broke in.

“You must not be troublesome, Tricksy. Come here.”

He turned. She was standing, in her dark blue dress and garden-hat, against the silver stems and yellow leaves of the beeches. A little flush tinged the ivory face, the sweet, grave brown eyes were bent upon the elder child, while the younger one toddled at her heels. This was the picture he often recalled in after-years; it was thus he thought of her, thus he felt that he had first seen her; for the glimpse of the previous evening had left no enduring impression. But every incident of this afternoon remained in his memory. Not a word she let fall—and how unimportant would they seem if set down here!—that Hubert St. John ever forgot. She said but little; he had

most of the talking to himself; but now and again he put some question which drew from her a reply. They strolled along the pathway, the children playing before them; they sat on a bench, while the children gathered more nuts; the sunshine made a network of blue shadows among the fallen leaves; a little wind rustled in the branches overhead as the evening wore on, and stirred the edges of the girl's soft brown hair. He talked of Athelstone, and she listened; he asked about her old home, and she felt drawn to speak to him, as she never did to the curate and the other gentlemen whom she saw occasionally at Danecourt. For this was a friend of *his*, who had known him since boyhood. It was a link between them; she could talk of Ripple, and feel that he was interested in what was nearer to her heart than anything in the world.

She was a little shy at this time, as was only natural. Not that she was afflicted with self-consciousness; but a fear of putting herself, or of being put, into undue prominence, and a very humble estimate of her own powers, kept her

mostly silent in company. She looked bewildered at a compliment, and was a little slow to seize the jests current in society. Though never awkward or embarrassed, she needed sympathy to be able to converse, and it was this she had found in Mrs. Goldwin. The eight months passed with that kind and clever woman had done more to enlarge and mature the young girl's intellect than years passed in the old life at Ripple would have done. But the talks she had in those long *tête-à-tête* evenings, though they helped to form her judgment upon many things, did not teach her to talk nonsense with grace and assurance. The truth is, she would never, under any circumstances, have kept up the ball of banter with spirit; it was not in her nature; and, circumstanced as she was, her reserve sat well upon her—at least, so thought all except the young men who were disappointed to find the pretty governess “awfully slow and well-behaved—doesn't understand chaff!”

Now, however, sitting on the woodland bench, she found herself listening with interest to the

young man's conversation, which flowed so easily, and yet was so full of thought and suggestion, so free from compliment or personality, that from response she was drawn on to question and argument insensibly.

“Children should be allowed to read no poetry but the Old Ballads, and Walter Scott, and Macaulay's ‘Lays,’”—St. John was saying—“nothing that is morbid and unhealthy.”

“The first poetry I read was ‘Percy's Reliques,’” said Nellie, looking up, with a smile. “Lord Athelstone gave it me when I was very small.”

“I am glad he gave you such wholesome food,” St. John replied. “His taste in poetry has deteriorated since then, I am afraid.”

She paused, and hesitated a moment.

“I read in a paper some time since that he had published a volume of poems. I will not believe what they said about them was true; but Mrs. Goldwin would not send for the book. Have you read it?”

“I have—it is not a book you would like, it is not one you would even understand. You

must rest satisfied with this assurance: you know I am his friend."

"He *did* write beautiful poetry once," said the girl, in a low voice.

"And will again, I hope. Lord Athelstone is very clever; but he is young, and his judgment is not matured. What he writes now he will condemn and repudiate later. I have told him so."

"Is her ladyship vexed with him?" asked Nellie, anxiously.

"I don't know. Perhaps she has something of a mixed feeling; the mother's vanity may be flattered. The book has made considerable stir. Tell me," he added, abruptly, desirous of getting off ground where he felt himself to be trammelled, "who is your favourite poet, Miss Dawson?"

"Lord Byron. Mrs. Goldwin says I ought to like Shakspeare better; perhaps when I know more I shall. But I cannot pretend to care for more than parts of his plays now."

"I am not surprised. Shakspeare's wonder-

ful humanity seldom appeals to the very young. One must have thought, and known, and suffered a good deal before the deep truth, the insight into human nature, the beauty of many a transient touch can be appreciated. I shall read some of Shakspeare to my cousin and you, when the other guests are gone, and try to make you see he was a far wiser and greater man than Byron."

"Dere's a 'quirrel running up dat tree," cried Tricksy, running. "P'esse, Mit Dawton, let gentleman go after de 'quirrel for me," and she pulled lustily at Hubert's coat once more.

"It is time for us to be going home," said the young governess, rising, with a scarcely perceptible flush at the child's suggestion that she was *detaining* St. John. "Come, Flossy, come in to tea. Come, Tricksy."

She took the younger child's hand. He rose, but did not accompany them back to the house. There was his essay to be written; and now he was alone. The last fold of the dark blue dress had disappeared among the now dark

grey beech-stems, the last bubble of the children's joyous voices had burst and died upon the air; he had the woodland path in the gathering twilight to himself. And there was his essay to be written.

He had some difficulty in concentrating his thoughts.

CHAPTER XIX.

MISS ELIZA BRAWNE had a very attentive listener that night, and the scherzo met with a reticent, measured approbation carrying with it a conviction of its sincerity which might not have accompanied more vehement applause. When it was done, St. John rose, and came to the piano, and stood there, discussing the new school of music in Germany with the intelligent conservative exponent of Mendelssohn, who shuddered at the names of Wagner, Brahms, and Raff. Mrs. Goldwin wished he would sit down ; but he did not ; he asked Miss Eliza to play a certain andante of Beethoven's, and then he wandered away ; strolled up to the fire-place, examined a picture on the wall, said

a few words to the elder Miss Brawne (who was engaged upon some high art embroidery, on a sad-coloured ground, representing a nameless fruit, like gigantic scarlet wafers transfixed on thorns), and finally drew a light cane chair near to the table at which Nellie was seated, working.

Mrs. Goldwin was a little vexed. This was not at all what she wished. It was giving her nice little governess an importance which was undesirable in every way. She was sincerely fond of her—too fond to desire that the child should be spoiled, or that she should rouse any feelings but sympathy and benevolence in the breasts of the Miss Brawnes. It was hardly possible that this marked preference should not be resented. He sat there the whole evening, and no manoeuvre of his cousin's succeeded in making him abandon his entrenchment behind the table, and so near Nellie that what he said could be overheard by none.

The Miss Brawnes were left to two uninteresting and ineligible sportsmen, who knew nothing of Mendelssohn or high art embroidery,

while Mrs. Goldwin had to talk to the curate. It was altogether wrong; *his* place was beside Miss Dawson, with a view to whose especial edification this excellent young man had been invited to spend a few days at Danecourt; and here was Mrs. Goldwin, having to pump up conversation about the neighbourhood to him, while she tried to catch with one ear the murmured talk that was going on at the table! It would have tried any temper less sweet than hers; but she was not going to allow matters to continue thus.

“Hubert,” she said that night, as he handed her her bed-room candle (the ladies were gone upstairs, the men to the smoking-room), “you must oblige me by going with us on our expedition to-morrow—I can’t spare you.”

“But you are to be out the whole day—and I have work I must get through. I did so little to-day.”

“Because you chose to play with the children, and talk to Miss Dawson in the wood. No, the Brawnes are only here for a few days, and they are much too good to be wasted on

those two stupid men. You really must come."

"How long do the Brawnes stay?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I will make this sacrifice for you *once*, Mary; but remember, when I came down here, you promised I should do exactly as I liked."

"So you shall, after to-morrow. But I am sure you *will* like it. The Brawnes are so delightful, if you would only cultivate them."

"They are so cultivated already," said her cousin, laughing.

"Nonsense!" cried Mary Goldwin, impatiently. "You are determined to shut your eyes to everything except Miss Dawson's pretty eyes. I am ashamed of you, Hubert. I had expected better things of you. I will not have you turning my little governess's head. I have much too great a regard for her. Good night."

But neither did the expedition the following day, nor any subsequent effort which Mrs. Goldwin made during the Miss Brawnes' stay at Danecourt, succeed in producing premonitory

symptoms of admiration for either sister from Hubert St. John. He conversed pleasantly with both; they were really well-read, agreeable women, and justified, in a great measure, Mrs. Goldwin's enthusiasm; but neither sister touched, or even interested him in the faintest degree; and it needed no very keen sight to detect this.

At the end of a week his cousin threw up the game. She did not attempt to detain the Brawnes when the limit of their visit drew near; she even felt a certain relief, though it was accompanied with a sense of failure, when the sisters drove away from the door; of relief, that is, from a continued strain and effort to accomplish the unattainable. "You may take a horse to the water, but you can't make him drink," she murmured to herself, with half a smile and half a sigh. Now she and Hubert would be alone together—without interruption, without any disturbing element; and she would get to understand his condition of mind better than she felt she did at present.

He spent the greater part of his days ostensi-

bly in writing and in walking. He hated driving, and therefore never accompanied his cousin, and when she came home she always lay down for a couple of hours. Thus it came, to pass that St. John, as it seemed, in the natural course of things, was a great deal "with the children"—that was the euphemism by which it pleased him to designate his daily study of Nellie Dawson's character. It was not complicated. Barring that one secret in her young life, the current of her thoughts and feelings flowed clear, and was reflected in her sweet, truthful eyes. There was none of that reserve and careful balance of words which—occasionally bred in early youth by untoward circumstances—are the species of wisdom that geniality most cordially resents. He read her—or thought that he read her—like a book, and it was a study that never seemed to tire him. After the type of woman he had seen chiefly in India, how fresh and lovely did this young creature's nature seem to him! What could the world—all the Miss Brawnes, with their highly-surfaced minds, all the "eligible connec-

tions" Mrs. Goldwin could recommend him— what could the world offer him that was worth this?

One evening that Hubert had been reading aloud some passages in various plays of Shakspeare to the ladies, while the children played in a distant corner of the room, when they and Nellie had retired, Mary Goldwin said abruptly to her cousin—

"Do you know, I am afraid there is a certain similarity between the case of my little governess and Helena in 'All's Well that Ends Well.' "

"What do you mean?" he said, quickly, looking up.

"That her affections are set hopelessly in a very different station from her own."

He flushed to the very roots of his hair. She saw it, and continued, ruthlessly—

"Of course you know to what I allude? To your friend, who has stood in much the same position towards her that Bertram did to Helena."

He started and grew suddenly pale; it was nearly a minute before he said,

“What reason have you for thinking this, Mary?”

“My own observation—especially when she first came here. Even now, whenever his name is mentioned, I see the change that comes over her face.”

“Her gratitude to the Athelstone family is enough to account for that. I should be very, *very* sorry if you were right. Good God! To think of the girl sacrificing her life to such a chimera!”

“As to that, Hubert, time and absence will cure her, I make no doubt. But have you not told me yourself how attractive Lord Athelstone is? What is more likely than that her affections should be set on the ‘bright particular star’ that first shone down on her?”

“I can’t believe it. Athelstone writes mischievous stuff—propounds all sorts of theories I hate; but he is not the man to try to entangle a girl’s affections for the mere gratification of vanity.”

“I did not say he *had* tried.”

“You believe, then, that this modest, retiring

little girl would become enamoured of a man who did not care—or, at least, pretend that he cared—for her? It's monstrous."

"What did Helena do? Did not Shakspeare understand human nature?"

"I have always thought her the least attractive of all the women he meant to be so. She was an artful, persevering minx. He has given her some beautiful things to say, but her conduct removes all sympathy from her, in my opinion."

"Well, she was a thousand times too good for that miserable Bertram. She must have repented of her persistence in after-life, poor thing! But this is wandering away from the point, Hubert. You know as well as I do it is possible for the most charming, modest girl to set her affections on some man who cares nothing about her. One sees it every day. My theory is that this simple child has been dazed by your brilliant Byronic friend. She will recover, but it will take time—probably some years, and then she will marry, I hope, some nice schoolmaster or country curate."

“Prosperity has had its usual effect on you, I see, Mary. You are become very worldly,” observed her cousin, with a sarcastic smile.

“Why so?”

“You adjust the social balance with such nicety. There must be a rise—but not too great a rise, for your governess. You like her very much indeed—but a schoolmaster or a poor curate is as much as you can afford.”

“And if I do ‘adjust the social balance with nicety,’ as you call it,—what then? Do you think it is because I attach an undue importance to position? No. I am ever so much older than you, Hubert, in knowledge of the world, and I know that marriages in different stations of life rarely answer—either when a woman of rank and fortune marries much beneath her, or *vice versâ*. Such marriages are certainly not to be desired as offering the best chance of happiness.”

“That depends on the character of the contracting parties,” returned Hubert, smiling again. “Speaking as a man who doesn’t care a rush for worldly distinctions, I say that, if a girl is,

in feeling, in education, and in manner *a lady*, she is what many a woman of high social standing is not, and any man may be proud to win her."

"That is all very fine theoretically; but the more sensitive and *unvulgar* she is, the more she will feel she is in a false position—admitted into many houses upon sufferance, as it were, and possibly conscious that she is an obstacle to her husband's advancement."

"There is your worldly way of looking at things again! A man who is worth his salt will never go to a house where his wife is admitted 'on sufferance,' and his merits must be colourless indeed, if his wife's parentage is to counterbalance them. In the present day, if a fellow was a shoebblack, and his wife the rat-catcher's daughter, provided he has ability, he must rise—nothing can keep him back."

"You are thinking of the Duke of Lucca's groom, who rose to be his prime-minister," said Mary Goldwin, laughing; "but I beg to remark that is beside the argument. I don't object to the shoebblack or the groom; it is the

ratcatcher's daughter I make a stand against. The lives of many learned and remarkable men prove the truth of my contention: their marriages were as millstones round their necks; and their wives, if they had any feeling, must have suffered cruelly from the consciousness that such was the case." Then, abandoning generalities, this bold woman, with an unpremeditated rush, clave her hearer to the heart with the scimitar of personal application. "If you are going to make a fool of yourself, my dear Hubert, for goodness' sake leave Danecourt at once."

He winced, and was silent for a moment. Then he raised those clear, piercing eyes of his from the book on which they rested, and said, simply,

"Why did you ask me here, Mary?"

"Candidly, my dear, besides my wish to see you, I hoped you might fall in love with one of the Miss Brawnes; but you turned away from both those charming women, either of whom would have made you an unexceptionable wife."

“*Either?* My dear Mary, I still hold the views you once held, before you—when you were twenty, that those who have any individuality cannot be mated indifferently, *either* with this one or that one. If a man is free, and can fortunately marry the woman—the *one* woman—who, he feels, is calculated to bless and to complete his life, no consideration should stand in his way.”

“Well?”

“My mind is made up about Miss Dawson. I have never seen a girl to compare with her, in my eyes. You know that old story about me, perhaps, in India? Don’t throw that in my teeth. I was two and twenty—I was a fool; but I never was deceived about *her*. Having asked me here, Mary, you must abide by the consequences. If this girl will have me, I shall marry her.”

“If she accepts, I shall be sorry—very sorry for you both. My own belief is that she will not accept, and I would have spared you the pain of this by what I began by telling you.

But, if you are bent on doing a foolish thing, let it be done at once."

Mary Goldwin, though she was something of a tyrant, had a loving, benevolent nature. She wished everyone to be happy, if possible, as she directed; if not, why then after his own unwise fashion. As she took her solitary drive that afternoon, she argued thus with herself:

"Few young men are situated like Hubert—his own master as to fortune, and absolutely without ties or responsibilities of any kind. His committing a folly can hurt or distress no one. Again, his nature is peculiar—averse from general society—averse from the ordinary fields of ambition. He wants a companion who can enter into his life-work—his philanthropic schemes—without pining for the pleasures of the world—a wife he can, in some measure, mould; and such this little girl would certainly be. It is a pity—and I know I am right, on principle, to oppose it—but, if he could bring her in time to care for him, he might, perhaps, with a view to his own happi-

ness, do worse. Yes; I must confess to myself, though I would not to *him*, that he might do worse.

Meantime two were seated under the wide-armed cedar beside the stream that divided the garden from the beech-wood. There was sunlight and tremulous blue shadow among the leaves and mosses on the opposite bank, but here where they sat was impenetrable gloom, under the pall of the immoveable black foliage which no ray could pierce. The children had a little friend to visit them, and were absorbed in daisy-chains upon the lawn; Nellie had her needle-work, at which she stitched rapidly. She had learned not to feel the least afraid of the big, kind, clever man beside her. She even ventured, in her miserable ignorance, to ask him all manner of questions. For it would seem that he knew almost everything, and that to instruct her was a pleasure instead of a bore. It was wonderful what confidence, what repose she felt in the company of this acquaintance of little more than a fortnight's standing. With

Athelstone, on the contrary, she had never been without a certain sense of fear, begotten of her blind admiration and craving for his approval. With this far graver and more imposing man, she experienced no solicitude as to her talk. It never occurred to her to consider what he thought of her. It was pure benevolence that made him join her in her daily walk with the children, and converse with her of an evening, instead of with the Miss Brawnes or any other ladies that might be present. She was not concerned to show her ignorance before him, so she spoke freely.

He had been telling her of his London project, and how sanguine he was of its success.

“The thing that is most wanted among the poor of London is the sacrifice of time and brains. People are ready enough to help with their money; but few, comparatively, are able or willing to devote any portion of their lives, like the late George Denison, to humanizing some of their fellow-citizens. I am happily so situated that I can; and I mean to do so.”

“How I should like to do it, too, if I was able!” said Nellie, simply.

He was leaning his head upon his hand, his elbow resting on his crossed knee, so that he could look under the garden-hat which shaded the girl's face, as she bent over her work.

“Will you help me?” he asked, in a low voice. “Not now—not at once—I do not ask for an answer yet—you know me too little, perhaps, though I feel I know you so well—by-and-by——”

He paused for a moment, and the girl, who had raised her eyes in wonder, somewhat disconcerted him by exclaiming,

“How *could* I help you, Mr. St. John? I am sure I would, if I could.”

“Could you ever like me well enough, do you think, to become my wife? Do not look so frightened, dear. I have given you my heart—it is yours—but I do not ask you to make me any promise now; I shall never change. You are very young—you have seen nothing of the world. Wait. Only

think of me as your best, unalterable friend.”

“Oh! Mr. St. John—this is some mistake. Oh! sir, if Mrs. Goldwin knew——”

“Be quite at ease; she does know. She even urged my speaking to you. She——”

“Oh, pray—pray do not go on. You distress me. I don’t know what to say. I so little thought——”

“I have taken you by surprise. Say nothing—or only say this: that there is no obstacle in the way of our union—no one to whom your affections are engaged.”

“No, no,” cried the girl, in an agony of terror. “There is no one; how could there be?” It seemed as if her secret were about to be dragged from her. Her cheek crimsoned and paled; then she burst into tears, indignant tears. It was cruel, it was shameful, to make her tell a lie. Her heart was hardened against the kind, brave fellow who sat there, and who would have given up his life for her.

“Don’t cry, dear—don’t cry, my child. That is quite enough. I am satisfied, and will say no more now. I have to go to London to-

morrow, and I do not think my cousin would care that I should return here. But she talks of wintering in Rome; and if so, I shall certainly take a month's holiday and follow her. If you can give me any hope then, I shall be the happiest man alive. But remember, whatever happens, I am your friend—you cannot deny me that—and a true friend is worth something in life. Dear, God bless you!”

He took her hand, held it a moment in his, and left her.

But those daisy-chain makers were not wholly unmindful of what passed.

“Mamma,” said Tricksy that evening, “why did Coudin Hubert make Mit Dawton cwy under de tedar dit afternoon?”

Mamma said nothing to Cousin Hubert, but discreetly held her peace. When he bade her good night, however, the young man said,

“I am going to-morrow, Mary. I have business in London, and, after what you said to-day, I feel I should only be a disturbing influence here. I have spoken, and it was not as you thought. But I have no answer. It is only

fair she should know something of life, and see more of me before deciding. Like Ravenswood, 'I bide my time.' ”

CHAPTER XX.

ONE crisp, sparkling morning in the following December a tall lady, singularly clad, stood on the sunny terrace on the Pincio in Rome. Beside her was a large, comfortably-furred white poodle, her only companion. She was sketching in a small book, as she leant there on the balustrade; but it was not St. Peter's, nor any of the glittering domes of the fair city, with its background of the Monte Mario, that tempted her to draw. At the back of the Via Babuino, upon which she looked, was a wooden balcony to which the last yellow leaves of a vine were clinging. Upon this balcony were hung sundry clothes to dry. Two great earthen jars and a string of onions were

also accessories to the picture, the only figures in which were a mother and her child. The woman wore a white *panno* on her head, and the sunlight touched a spot of scarlet in her skirt. But, as is generally the case, they moved before the artist had completed drawing her unconscious sitters ; and, as she closed her book and turned her steps homewards to the "Europa," she became aware that her steps were followed, though at a respectful distance, by a young man, who happened to have been the only other person on the terrace at that early hour.

The lady's appearance was so striking that indeed it was no wonder she should attract attention. She had a peculiar nobility of aspect, which was more remarkable than her beauty, and, though eccentrically attired, it was impossible to associate the idea of vanity or coquetry with such simple dignity. She wore a dark red robe—it would be sacrilege to call it a gown or frock—trimmed with fur, and made as nearly as possible like that we are accustomed to associate with Faust's Marguerite. A velvet

and gold bag was slung at her side, and on her head was a small cap of fur. Beneath it her hair, which was of a reddish brown and very thick, hung in loose coils in a net far down her back. Her face was pale, and her features not absolutely regular; but the light grey eyes were singularly lustrous, and the mouth, though perhaps too large for perfect beauty, had the charm of combined sweetness and decision which was felt by even casual passers-by.

The passer-by on this occasion—and he could not be called casual, for he had passed several times while she was sketching without her looking up—was Wilfred Athelstone. He and his mother had arrived in Rome a few days previously, and taken up their abode at the “Tempietto,” that charming house at the corner of the Via Gregoriana, overlooking the Trinità del Monte steps.

He ran into the drawing-room where Lady Athelstone sat, a quarter of an hour later, and flung down his broad-leaved hat on the table, and himself into a chair.

“I have just seen the most divine creature,

mother!—a goddess walking this earth in a mediæval costume. Burne Jones never conceived anything more lovely—and then her dress—so entirely delightful. She is like a Botticelli, or Lippo Lippi—stepped out of a frame!”

“Indeed, my dear! How very curious! Botticelli was a Florentine, was he not, born, if I remember right, in 1437? How very odd that a young woman in the present day should go about dressed like that!”

“Not at all odd. It shows she has a soul that is above subscribing to those horrid French fashions—those degrading swathing-bands, that reduce every woman to a tailor’s block. The idea of any M. Worth dictating to the women throughout the universe how they are to clothe! Wait till you see this girl. I have discovered who she is—and, curiously enough, I remember now having heard all about her from Lady Frances Cope.”

“Really! Then she is in society? I thought she must be some painter’s model, from your account, my dear; but Lady Bannockburn, I

know, is very particular as to whom she lets Frances associate with."

"Lets her *associate* with? Why, that dumpy little thing is not fit to tie the shoestrings of this goddess!" laughed Wilfred.

"The qualities we look for in an associate," remonstrated Lady Athelstone, with a weak attempt to improve the occasion, "do not depend—eh, my dear?—upon—upon looks. You can know nothing about this person's mind and character. What is her name?"

"Her name is Brabazon; and my instinct, my perception, would tell me a great deal about her mind and character, if I had not already heard so much of both from her friend. She used to say she was unlike any other woman in the world, and so she is—I feel sure she is."

"Brabazon," repeated Lady Athelstone, meditatively. "There used to be some Brabazons I knew in Park Lane."

"You are not likely ever to have known these. The father married an Italian, and they have lived chiefly abroad. The father died

here a few years ago. Miss Brabazon has never gone out in London, and her acquaintance there is chiefly in the literary and artistic world. They are here at the 'Europa' (I followed her in there, and asked the porter). I wonder who knows her? I must get introduced at once."

"I am going to the Embassy to-day. I will ask about them there," said his mother, with something approaching to a sigh.

This dear, brilliant, gifted son of hers was sadly difficult to manage—always breaking out into some extravagance. Heaven only knew what these people were like! She prayed they might be unobjectionable; but she felt some doubt on the subject, in spite of Lady Frances's supposed intimacy—for that might be only dear Wilfred's assumption: he always jumped so rapidly at conclusions.

The inquiries at the Embassy, however, proved perfectly satisfactory. Mrs. Brabazon's birth, it is true, was supposed to be obscure; but she had always been of irreproachable conduct, and that in spite of considerable tempta-

tion; for she had been remarkable for her beauty, and her husband had always led the life of an invalid. His income had been scarcely more than moderate, but it was found, at his death, that he had lived within his means, and his only child was heiress to a considerable fortune. Since she was fifteen—and she was now six and twenty—she had never had a home. They lived at hotels, six months in one place, or as much as nine months in another: health and education being the two motive powers that had regulated their course during many years. Since Mr. Brabazon's death they had been even less in England than before, passing each winter in a different capital. The untried had attractions for both mother and daughter: they liked travelling, despised what is ordinarily understood as comfort, and were indifferent to general society.

“You will find a lot of their intimates—and a very queer lot they are—if you ever drop in there of an evening,” said Beauport, a merry young attaché, to Athelstone at the English club that day—“painters and poets, with shaggy beards

and suspicious linen, strong-minded American females, and a few persevering Italian fortune-hunters, who, undeterred by the very tall talk that goes on, and by Miss Brabazon's treatment of themselves—for she can be contemptuous at times, let me tell you—worship at her shrine constantly. I go in sometimes for the fun of the thing; but I can't stand it very long, or very often. My intellect is not very strong, and the strain is too great. I should have blood to the head."

"Can't you take me to-night? I want to know her at once."

"No, I can't," replied the attaché, decidedly. "I tried that on once, but I found they objected to having people brought to them. If we meet them, I'll ask to introduce you; but I warn you they are peculiar. They don't care about position, and that sort of thing, a bit. Miss Brabazon will like to know you because you are a poet—that's all."

Nothing could have quickened Wilfred's desire to make the acquaintance of this original young lady more than this speech; and the

following Sunday afternoon at our charming ambassadress's little reception the introduction was effected.

Lady Athelstone looked in astonishment at the apparition of a tall young woman in faded green, with puffed sleeves tied up with faded blue; but the face was wonderfully sweet, and Lady Athelstone could not but greet it with forbearance. In the mother there was nothing to be connived at; she was still a very handsome woman, with that grave grace which belongs to Italians, and her attire was only conspicuous from her chancing to be the only woman in black.

Wilfred at once monopolized Miss Brabazon, and Lady Frances Cope was naturally the ground he first broke.

“I have heard so much of you from her—I feel as if I knew you.”

“I have also heard of you,” replied the young lady, looking directly into his eyes. He did not wince, and she went on, “Do you know that she and her mother are coming here very soon?”

“No, I didn't,” he replied, carelessly. “I am very glad. She is capital company—only I wish she could come without her mother, who is meddling, and a bore.”

“I never found Lady Bannockburn meddling; and Lady Frances is something better than ‘good company.’ She is a loyal, noble girl; and I have the greatest respect, as well as affection, for her.”

“You ought to have,” returned Wilfred, nothing daunted, “for I never heard one woman praise another as she did you.”

“Perhaps you have been unfortunate in your experience of our sex,” said the young lady, gravely.

He understood it all. She had heard of Madame Uberti from Lady Frances or her mother. “Confound those gossips!” was his secret objurgation.

“I have known some very good women,” said he, biting his lip.

“Have you? I should not have thought so from your poems.”

“You have read them, then?” He looked pleased.

“I have.”

He looked less pleased.

“From the tone in which you say that, I fear you liked nothing in the book? Of course, I am aware it is not one for a conventionally brought-up young lady; but I fancied you were not that.”

“No, I am not that, or I should hardly acknowledge I have read it.”

“Why did you do so?”

She paused a moment.

“Because I had some curiosity, having heard of you from my friend.”

“And you hated the book altogether?”

“I thought it showed misapplied talent—a capacity for doing better things.”

“These poems are meant to illustrate the various phases of a young man’s inner life. Nothing must be hid. His soul’s vicissitudes—the outpourings of his rapturous though transient passions—his discouragements as to this present

world—his doubts as to the next. You must take it as a whole, not condemn isolated passages.”

Miss Brabazon looked up at a small Byzantine tryptich on a gold ground, which hung on the wall opposite. To the uninitiated it was crude and harsh: to her it seemed full of solemn majesty and fervour.

“If I tell you what I really think, you will not mind?” she said, slowly.

“I shall not mind.”

“I do not hear in your verse the throbbing pulse of real passion, any more than I hear the cry of a soul’s real anguish. It seems to me like a clever imitation of both, and leaves me unmoved. As to the doubts expressed, it is the fashion for every young man to have them, and talk about them, now. But when I look at such a picture as *that*, which has soothed many a troubled spirit for centuries past, and think of the simple lives that produced work like that, I feel how miserable and insignificant is all the labour and learning of the present day, the outcome of which is a lamentable cry

that can only grieve and startle those whose souls are at peace, and bring no comfort to those who are afflicted.”

A little colour had come into her pale cheeks with the excitement of saying unreservedly what she felt to a stranger about his writings. It was boldness which extorted Wilfred's admiration, in spite of his annoyance. There was neither assumption nor vehemence in her manner, and the lovely look in her eyes, as she bent them upon him, was that of a reproving angel. He could not be angry.

“Sylvia,” said Mrs. Brabazon, approaching, “it is time we are to be going. It make dark so soon. Lord Athelstone, I am at 'ome nearly always in *prima sera*. I shall be 'appy to see you, when you like to call.”

And thus ended Athelstone's first interview with Sylvia Brabazon.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE woman upon whom Wilfred Athelstone's thoughts were now riveted presented a combination which to some minds was inexplicable. She had an artistic love of what was picturesque, and that which appeared delightful to her in colour or in form, she saw no good reason why she should not wear. That this love of strange attire should co-exist with an indifference to general admiration, and an absence of all coquetry, seemed impossible to many. But, after all, given the grand, simple outline of such a character, it was not difficult to explain how the filling up had come to have this apparent inconsistency. Her father had much affected the society of artists, and from

childhood she had lived a great deal with them, and with many of the free lances of literature, whose company Mr. Brabazon had found diverting in the various towns where they resided. Her eye had been early trained to judge many things by the standard of persons who were ignorant of, or revolted from, the canons of the "*comme il faut*."

Her fine intelligence and elevated instincts were, indeed, vastly superior to those from whom she imbibed many of her opinions, and it was curious to note how a mind, unspotted by affectation, accepted the formula of men who were blatant impostors. She lived very much in a world of her own—a world the inhabitants of which but little resembled those she saw around her. She had, as yet, never loved: she had had no delusions: she was happy.

Mrs. Brabazon had never sought to exercise any influence over her daughter. She was intellectually Sylvia's inferior, in every respect, but a strong affection subsisted between them. Mrs. Brabazon had seen things for twenty years

through her husband's eyes, and for the last six through her daughter's. She was simple, and profoundly indolent; unworldly, amiable, with occasional outbursts of passion; a devourer of French novels, rarely going out if she could avoid it, but living for her *prima sera*, and the gossip it brought with it. In her the Italians were sure of a ready listener, and round her they were generally grouped, while Sylvia was discussing literature or art with persons of whom Mrs. Brabazon knew little besides their names. They were her daughter's friends, and belonged to the category of things that were to be accepted, but not understood. It had been so in her husband's time, and she had become used to the presence of those strange, mildewed professors, or others like them, and to hear a jargon talked of which she barely understood the rudiments.

At the imperative desire of her son, Lady Athelstone called next day at the "Europa," and left her card. She hoped she was not acting unwisely; these people were received at the Embassy, and Lady Bannockburn knew them.

The daughter, too, had a sweet face ; but it was not good taste to render herself so conspicuous : her dress made one shudder. Still she was respectable, and after that Uberti episode, and dear Wilfred's avoidance of all society in London or in the country during the last eight months, it was something to see him willing to visit people who were above reproach. On the other hand, Lady Porchester had said at the Embassy that "no one had ever heard of these Brabazons," and that if there was a thing she abhorred, it was "a woman who goes in for being artistic." Lady Porchester was known to have an exceedingly bitter tongue, and she had a young daughter to whom Wilfred had not vouchsafed a syllable. Therefore Lady Athelstone was a little afraid. She hoped Lady Porchester would not think that she was going out of her way to encourage an intimacy between Wilfred and these people.

That evening Athelstone made his first bow in Mrs. Brabazon's drawing-room. He was received with cordial graciousness by that lady, whom he found seated before a tea-table. He

was surprised at the transformation which taste had effected in an ordinary hotel apartment. Hangings of old Italian embroidery, fine in design and general "tone," though much faded, concealed the hideous doors, and covered one long stretch of putty-coloured wall opposite the fireplace. On the sides of the room hung a number of oil-sketches and small pictures of Miss Brabazon's painting. An easel stood near the window. There was an odd mixture of books upon the tables: English essays; German poetry; Italian MSS. on vellum; the last enunciations of Zola and Daudet. A mandolin lay upon the piano; the white poodle upon a Turkish rug. The air was heavy with the scent of flowers in majolica jars.

Mrs. Brabazon and a dark little woman who sat on the same sofa were supported on either side by a young Italian, olive in complexion and oily in manner. The Marchese Tivoli and Count Scappa were good-natured and impecunious. The one was big, and the other little. They did nothing, thought nothing, aspired to nothing that a shepherd from the Abruzzi, with

a six months' veneer of civilization, might not have done. Politics were a dead letter to them; so was Literature; so was Art. Neither had ever been inside the Gallery of the Vatican, nor had visited the Palace of the Cæsars. The Pincio, the Opera, the legs of a thorough-bred or of a ballet-girl, the fortune of the last American heiress (as per invoice), the chances of so-and-so succeeding so-and-so in such a married lady's good graces—these were their only subjects of conversation. They talked and laughed freely with Mrs. Brabazon; they were at their ease with her. At her daughter—"quel bel' pezzo di donna"—they looked much as flies may be supposed to gaze at a lump of sugar in an impenetrable glass case. So desirable, from every point of view, and so unattainable; nay, so absolutely unapproachable!

The object of these sighs stood leaning against the mantelpiece conversing with a gentleman and lady as Wilfred entered. She wore a high dress of some dark brown material, in which, here and there, appeared a thread of gold. She held a fan of peacocks' feathers in

her hand, and in the cloud of hair drifted over her brow were stuck three marigolds. As she leant there over the fire, she seemed to Wilfred's imagination to be some wonderful enchantress of old come to life.

The lady who sat near her on the sofa, however, belonged to the nineteenth century, without the possibility of misapprehension. Athelstone was introduced to her as Miss Decker, and with the first words she spoke he saw she was American. She was a vivacious, clever, determined little woman of five-and-thirty, the correspondent for two newspapers, one in New York and one in Philadelphia, who pushed her way everywhere, interviewed everybody, gave her decided views upon every subject (and some were very strange ones for an unmarried lady to attack), and had not a scruple in reporting all the private conversations she succeeded in obtaining with persons of note. Her dress was of the smartest prose, from the Boulevards; strongly accentuated, but sinning against no laws of fashionable grammar, as contrasted with the wild, indefensible poetry of Sylvia's attire.

The gentleman who balanced the equilibrium of power at this end of the room, until Athelstone upset it, was tall and thin, and all his movements were willowy. He was apparently about forty, was guiltless of any hair upon his face, and very little on his head; had a high, narrow, and receding forehead, and pale eyes, which at times flashed malevolently behind his short-sighted spectacles. It was a pity he was not better-looking; one felt he would have been so much happier. One fancied him sighing, as he gazed at his own image, "Alas! I cannot be beautiful, but at least I can be graceful. I owe it to my reputation." He had an uncomfortable way of knotting and writhing his members, down to the very roots of his body, when conversing, which would have impressed one as the result of a distressing humility, had it not been for the curious affectation of his delivery and the arrogance of his upper lip. Mr. Spooner was an apostle of culture; he had written a great deal, and lectured a great deal, and was considered an authority on art in every form, but especially Christian art. Persons who

did not like involved and nebulous English, anathematized his works ; but he could afford to smile at these : he had a large public of the young men and women who sip with delight at criticism that is presented to them with a froth of fine language.

Wilfred had meant to monopolize Miss Brabazon ; during the early part of the evening he found this was impossible. After introducing him to Miss Decker, she had at once renewed a discussion with the professor, which Wilfred's entrance had interrupted. And the little American fastened upon her new prey with a tenacity there was no shaking off. It must be confessed she amused Wilfred.

“ You're a great poet, I hear. I haven't read your works ; but I shall do so, and write them up in America.”

“ My works won't take you long—they're contained in one small volume.”

“ Oh !—They're rather voluptuous, I hear.”

He looked her full in the face, and said, “ Very.”

She laughed. Then she tried another tack.

“So you have just come right away from England, have you, Lord Athelstone? Well, I hope we are going to have a good time in Rome presently. We have been vurry dull till now.”

“I don’t care how dull it is. I didn’t come for society. I hate it.”

“Do you, now? That’s because you are a poet, I suppose. But pray, don’t you call this society?” she added, with twinkling eyes.

“This is sociability. There is a difference. Can you tell me who the lady is sitting by Mrs. Brabazon?”

“She is a marchesa. Oh, my! I forget her name. Let me see. I have it written down,” and she took a note-book from her pocket. “Pulci—that’s it.”

“Is she married?”

“Why, yes—more than most women. I have heard she has quite a number of husbands, of one sort or another. But I believe she has given up love for politics of late.”

“It is about time. She must be near fifty.”

“That’s so; but she is vurry clever. All the men like talking to her. She knows everything that goes on. Some people say she is a spy.”

“She can’t worm much out of those two young, stupid-looking Italians, I should think?”

“A woman can sometimes get more out of a fool than out of a genius, Lord Athelstone,” and her eyes twinkled merrily again. “Besides, she belongs to the Quirinal party, and, I guess, has few opportunities of meeting any of the ‘Neri’ except here, or in some other foreign ‘salon.’ Those two men belong to the Guardia Nobili, and will tell her all the gossip of the Vatican. They’re a couple of geese; but I often pluck them myself, and serve up their scandal in my letters.”

Wilfred laughed.

“Now tell me who is the man just come in, who looks as if all colour and starch had been washed out of him? So languid a specimen of humanity I have not seen for some time. Is he English?”

“No; he ought to be, but he’s Amurrican; not

a type of our go-ahead race, however. I guess that young man was born tired; and then he was raised in England, which just finished him. I am told half the young fellows in England are like that—a kind o' cross between Lord Dundreary and John the Evangelist. This is quite a model young man, and nourishes a hopeless passion for Miss Brabazon."

"Why does she have him here?"

"Why? I've just told you! Isn't that enough to melt any woman to pity? Here is another of her worshippers coming in—Mr. Briggs, the artist."

"Is *that* Briggs?—that burly, red-haired man? Well, he is not a beauty; but I admire his pictures. They are so bold and unconventional."

"That they certainly are—and the man is like them. Nothing limp and washed-out about *him*. *Vurry* sensual."

"Strong and coarse—yes. But I like the face, for all that."

"Sympathy?" suggested Miss Decker, maliciously. "No doubt he admires your poetry."

I went to his studio two weeks ago to see a portrait of Miss Brabazon he is painting, and——”

“Is it like? Has he done her justice?”

“Well, it does look like her; but he has given her too much colour; and then she is located in a sort of a bower of red azaleas—wonderfully painted, no doubt, but harassing to the eye. Still when I gazed round upon all the fair-haired goddesses, with their drapery—*nowhere*,—it was a relief to return to the picture of a woman clothed, and in her right mind.”

“He is Venetian in his luxury of form and colour. What is akin to that in Miss Brabazon’s beauty he would seize. I should not expect him to reproduce the Umbrian delicacy, the refinement, and dignity—that must be beyond him. My heavens! what a laugh! Does he always roar like that?”

“Always, when he has Professor Spooner for his butt.”

Wilfred turned and listened. The professor had taken up his parable again, after one scorn-

ful glance at the great hirsute painter. He fixed a vague, far-seeing gaze on the tapestried wall opposite.

“Yes,” he continued, “until we learn to take the sandals from off our feet when we enter the Temple of Art, until we drive the money-changers from its courts, and offer up the turtle-doves of sacrifice and obeisance, we shall never be purified. We shall continue to eat the flesh of swine with unwashed hands, and drink to the lees the debasing draughts of sensuality, by painting the superficies of flesh and goodly raiment delightful only to the grosser parts of man, and informed and elevated by no spirits of ethereal beauty.”

Briggs’s laugh was heard again.

“Sorry you don’t like pork, Spooner. You’re not a Jew? No, I thought not. As to spirits, I ‘inform’ myself very often with a glass of—not ether—but *absinthe*—never enough to ‘elevate’ me, however.”

“Yes, Mr. Briggs,” said Miss Brabazon, shaking her head, with a smile, “you take other

spirits worse than yourself, and—you know the rest. Is all life a jest to you? I wonder if you are ever serious.”

Strange to say, he looked for once disconcerted.

“*You* should know,” he said, with a sudden change of manner.

“Indeed I don’t. When you appear to be so, I always suspect you are laughing in your sleeve. For instance, at my sketch for ‘*La Belle Jeune Giroflée*.’”

“I have no sympathy with the pre-Raphaelite *language* of painting which you have adopted,” he said, bluffly. “That you know: I never have concealed it. I don’t like angular forms, and I *do* like aerial perspective. But between that and laughing at anything you do, there is a vast difference. I see a great deal honestly to admire in your work—a remarkable feeling for colour, a wonderful power of expression. The drawing of the limbs is not quite—quite right, sometimes——”

“Could Giotto draw limbs correctly? or Fra Angelico?” burst in Mr. Spooner, with a sar-

castic smile; but without looking anywhere near Briggs. "That cold perfection belongs to the Eclectic Schools. It is the spirit we want—the spirit we so rarely find—not the careful reproduction of our miserable limbs——"

"My limbs are *not* miserable—I deny it," shouted Briggs, laughing. "The human body was the last work in creation, Spooner,—consequently the best; and I don't see why it is to be pooh-pooh'd. You fall into ecstasies over a flower, or piece of jewellery, or pattern on a robe, minutely copied by one of these old fellows who, if he had devoted half the time to the human body, would not have given it to us dislocated. And your extravagant praise of all these minutiae does a deal of harm."

The idea of telling Professor Spooner that he did "a deal of harm!" It made even Wilfred the bold wince. Miss Brabazon said, with decision,

"I think you are quite wrong, Mr. Briggs. It is delightful to see the smallest thing in nature painted as well as the painter knows how. Anatomy is incalculably more difficult;

if he could have painted legs and arms perfectly, he would have done so. That is no reason he should not have copied accurately, and with a loving hand, the beautiful objects of still life around him."

"Very delightfully expressed," said the professor, gently waving his head up and down, in the young lady's direction. "Of course you are right. Of course there is no compassable voyage of opinion on other seas for the earnest mariner. Let us be thankful (the imperious brevity of human life precluding universal perfection) for any piece of genuine work—the filigree of a Van Eyk, or the fungi of a Mabuse. Do they not indicate subjection, humility, patience?—those fruits of the spirit so conspicuously absent, in these latter days, from Art!"

"*And its critics,*" laughed the painter. It was not in the professor's power to inflict a wound on him, as Wilfred observed; he was only vulnerable to Miss Brabazon's words.

"Will you show me some of your drawings,

Miss Brabazon?" asked Wilfred, suddenly, before the professor's acrimony had found a vent. She walked to the easel, and drew back a piece of silk that hung over it.

"This is what I am finishing. Can you guess the subject? I suppose you know well all the old metrical romances?"

Wilfred examined the water-colour drawing before him for two or three minutes before he replied. It represented an ancient church or monastery door, close to which grew a venerable ash-tree. In the hollow of the tree, a young woman upon her knees was depositing an infant, wrapped in a rich robe. The dawn was breaking over the roofs and turrets of a convent; far off the husbandmen were hastening to their labour in the field; a priest's figure was dimly discernible within the church.

"It is from one of Marie's Lays," he said at last. "I remember it all now, though I haven't read it since I was twelve years old. It is called 'Lay Le Fraine,' and tells how the wicked woman who maligned her friend for having

twins, when *she* was similarly visited, abandoned one of her children in an ash-tree.”

“ Yes, only this is not the mother, but a good little maid who prays—stay, here is the whole passage. I have copied it out for the benefit of those who do not know it:—

“ On her knees she sat her down,
 And said, weepand, her orisoun,
 ‘ O Lord,’ she said, ‘ Jesu Christ,
 That sinful mannes bedes* hearst,
 Underfong† this present
 And help this seli innocent,
 That it mote y-christened be
 For Marie-love, thy mother free!’
 She lookèd up, and by her seigh
 An asche, by her, fair and high,
 Well y-boughed, of mickle price ;
 The body was hollow, as many one is.
 Therein she laid the child, for cold,
 In the pel,‡ as it was, by-fold
 And blessèd it, with all her might.
 With that, it gan to dawe light,
 And fowles up, and sung on bough,
 And acre-men yede to the plough ;
 The maiden turned again anon
 And took the way she had ere gone.”

Wilfred was no judge of Art. His admiration

* Prayers

† Receive.

‡ Fur.

and his dislike were, critically, worth little; but they were, at least, honest. He saw nothing to admire in Raffaele's "Transfiguration," and in Michael Angelo's "Last Judgment," and he said so. On the other hand, an indifferent painting occasionally roused his enthusiasm. Miss Brabazon's drawing was by no means faultless; but it was poetically conceived, and she had that rare possession which can neither be bestowed nor taken away—the gift of "colour." The silver-grey shadows over the sleeping convent, the flush of dawn in the eastern sky, the dim-lit gold embroidery and fur folded round the babe, in the black hollow of the ash-tree, could not have been improved in their rich and tender harmony. The maid's kneeling figure was not absolutely right, but there was a quaint beauty in it which seemed—to Wilfred's imagination, at least—perfectly to embody the old poet's intention. In a word, he was moved as he seldom was by a design. Perhaps—who knows?—the absence of the critical in this young enthusiast was not wholly unpleasing to the fair artist, who was more

accustomed to technical praise or strictures from the *cognoscenti* than to the fervid recognition of that imaginative faculty which soars above perspective and the pectoral muscles.

She talked to him for some time, and the impression he made was far more favourable than on their first interview. She was not altogether satisfied with this change of opinion, which she regarded almost as an act of disloyalty to her friend. She had been displeased with his tone in speaking of Lady Frances and her mother; she had thought him a little presuming—perhaps on his rank, perhaps on his abilities. Either way, she had deemed it well to show this self-satisfied young lord that she was not over-favourably disposed towards him. She had, through the greater part of this evening, bestowed no attention upon him, until obliged, in common civility, to show him some of her drawings.

“He can certainly be very pleasant,” she said to herself that night, when he was gone. “I am not surprised at poor Frances’s infatuation.

There is a peculiar charm in his manner, just because it does not seem to be trying to charm you. If he ever loves truly, and loves *the right woman*, she ought to be able to do a great deal with him."

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.









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